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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

1957

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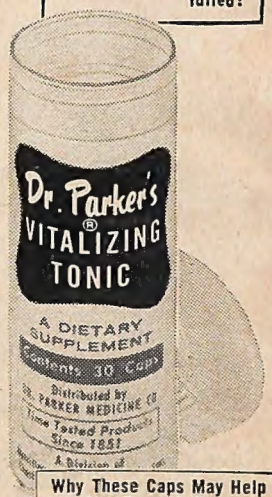

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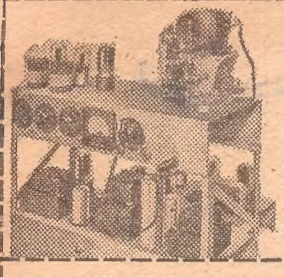

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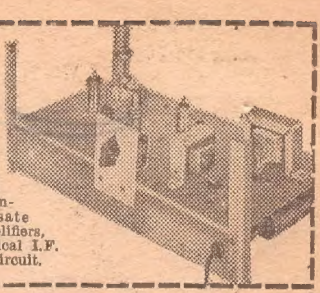

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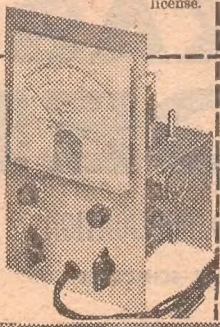

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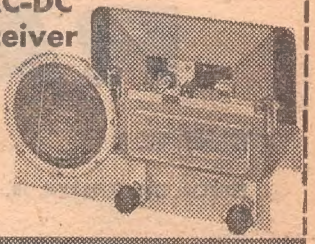

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TEXAS RANGERS

VOL. 67, NO. 3 | A THRILLING PUBLICATION | AUGUST, 1957

EDITOR: JIM HENDRYX, JR. | ASST. EDITOR: Z. SCHROEDER | ART EDITOR: V. SAN LUCAS

CONTENTS

GUNMEN'S LEGION (a Jim Hatfield Novel) ..... Jackson Cole 10
Disguised as a killer, the Lone Wolf joins a gang of notorious gunmen

TRAP (a Novelet) ..... W. J. Reynolds 74
They got his brother in a gun trap, but Clay wasn't so easily whipsawed

SHORT STORIES

HAUNTED DUST ..... John Cortez 57
TRAIL TO YESTERDAY ..... Joe Archibald 65
THE DRIFTER ..... W. C. Tuttle 97
CAVALRY ACTION ..... Philip Morgan 102

FEATURES

THE FRONTIER POST ..... Captain Starr 6
SAGEBRUSH SAVVY ..... S. Omar Barker 8
THE BLUNDERER ..... Jack Kytle 29
WICKED WORMS ..... Howie Lasseter 41
THE GREATEST RIDE ..... Lauran Paine 93

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The Apache Safe-Crackers

THE lot of Army paymasters has never been an easy one, and in the old days of Injun fighting it was pure hell on wheels.

Back in those hair-raising times, when the government sent out safes for Army use in remote districts, it was customary for the cavalry to chaperone the payrolls they contained. Paymaster and safe rode in a horse-drawn ambulance convoyed by a half dozen cavalrymen.

The story is told of a large band of Apaches who attacked one such convoy, killed the paymaster and two of the mounted escort, captured the ambulance and made away with the strongbox. These red lads knew what they were about, for the safe contained eight thousand dollars in cash. And while Indians may not have cottoned to the white man per se, they didn't have a thing against his wampum. They knew nothing, however, about safes.

They tried cutting a hole in the chilled steel by chopping away at it with their tomahawks. They made a mess out of their cranium cleavers, but the safe remained intact. Next step in "Operation Box Busting—Apache Style" was to build a huge, roaring fire. They rolled the safe into the midst of this and roasted it for three hours, but it was fireproof. While it was still hot, the Indians hurled huge rocks at it. It proved rockproof, too.

But what these lads lacked in safe-cracking savvy, they made up for in stubborn persistence. For more than a month they subjected the loot-laden safe to every abuse they could think of. They even had their medicine man cast a spell on it. Still no dice, no loot.

Tired but determined, the native safe-crackers dragged and pushed the four-hundred-pound strongbox up a mountain and pushed it off a cliff two hundred feet high. They figured the drop would shatter it like an eggshell. They figured wrong. When they clambered down to it, they found the box squatting upside down but still as intact as ever.

The Apache chief walked slowly around the safe, scowled fiercely at it and brought his hatchet down savagely on the iron box together with a scream of enraged frustration, which today might be broadly translated to mean: "Man, this box is the craziest!"

He ordered his braves to lug it to the river and dump it into the deepest spot, the idea being to let it soak for a few days like some rock-hard biscuit and maybe it would crumble. It didn't, of course.

Grimly determined, the Apaches tried a new tack. Although they knew nothing about "blowing" a safe, they tried gunpowder. Same results. Nothing. The strongbox sat stolidly, like a fat squaw, through an explosion that blew up half a dozen braves.

The redskins ran out of ideas and patience simultaneously, and at last gave up in disgust. Many months later a cavalry patrol discovered the safe lying in the bed of a creek. It looked like a fugitive from a junkyard, but when they had opened it as a safe should be opened, there lay the eight-thousand-dollar payroll, good as ever.

The moral—cracking a safe is not the easiest way to make a buck, especially if you're an Apache buck.

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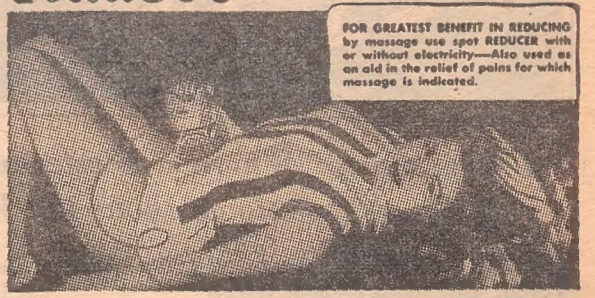
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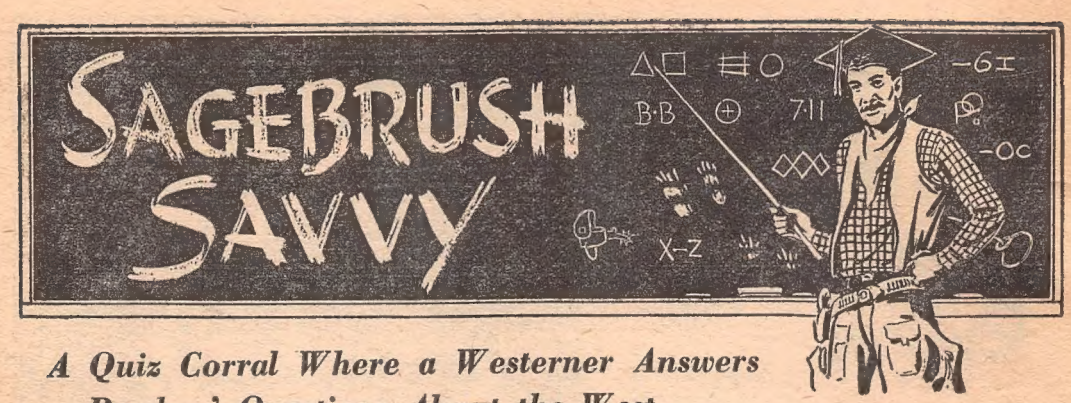

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Is the cowboy artist and writer, Ross Santee, still living?—R.B. (N.Y.)

A. Yes, in Arizona.

Q.—How many miles long was the old Santa Fe Trail?—O.J.F. (Ill.)

A.—From Independence, Mo., to Santa Fe, New Mexico by the Cimarrón Crossing Route was about 780 miles, by the Mountain Route and Ratón Pass it was about 840. The general course of the Mountain Route is followed today by U.S. Highway 50 as far west as La Junta, Colo., then by U.S. 350 to Trinidad, Colo., then by U.S. 85 on to Santa Fe. No through U.S. Highway follows the course of the Cimarrón Crossing Route, but various state roads follow sections of it, and U.S. 54 approximately parallels it somewhat to the south.

Q.—What was Deadwood Dick's real name? —E.D.C. (Mich.)

A.—Richard Clark.

Q.—How did a river as far south as New Mexico and Texas ever come to be named "Canadian?"—C.D.C. (Idaho)

A.—According to some accounts, the first south Texas cowmen to ride that far north mistakenly thought they were nearing Canada, hence presumed that the river winding down from the northwest must have its source in Canada, and therefore gave it that name. Other accounts credit the name to some waggish cowpoke who named it as a joke, for similar reasons. Since Spanish speaking sheepmen were already grazing their flocks along the course of the Canadian when the first Texan got there, I believe it is more probable that the name is derived from the Spanish word *cañada* (cahn-YAH-thah), meaning a glen between mountains, or a widening canyon between cliffs.

Q.—Who wrote "The Cowboys' Christmas Ball" and where can I find this poem?—E.H.T. (Minn.)

A. There are several "Cowboys' Christmas Ball" poems, of which I wrote a couple myself. But I take it you mean the time-honored classic written by the late William Lawrence (Larry) Chittenden about a Christmas dance at Anson, Tex., around 1890 and published in his book, *Ranch Verses,* in 1893. I don't know whether this book can still be bought or not, but the poem appears, set to music, in *The Cowboy Sings,* edited by Kenneth S. Clark, published by the Paull-Pioneer Music Corp. in 1932. Where else you will find the poem I don't know.

Q.—Just what does the word "savvy" actually mean?—T.H.D. (Calif.)

A.—"Savvy" is derived from the Spanish verb *saber* (sah-BAIR or sah-VAIR) meaning "to know," and from its third person singular *sabe* (SAH-bay or SAH-vay) meaning "he, she or it knows." In cow country lingo, as a noun, it means knowledge, information, understanding or know-how. As a verb it means to know, or to understand.

Q.—What was the real name of Pawnee Bill? —A.K.M. (Mass.)

A.—Major G. W. Lillie.

—*S. Omar Barker*

THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas*? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This *Free* Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show* you how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. *Use the coupon below* and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed *free* book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.

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Name.....

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Gunmen's Legion

A Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE

They were notorious gunmen from all over the West, banding together for a murderous cause—when the Lone Wolf joined them disguised as a killer

I

The Meeting

EL PASO sprawled in the subtle flame of a westering sun, Comanche Peak beginning to shroud San Antonio Street's drabness with its shadow. Texas Ranger, Jim Hatfield, riding San Antonio's middle dust on his great golden sorrel, reined up at the corner of Mesa Street and let the last of this sun flame warm his broad shoulders before turning into Mesa's darker channel.

He wondered then; where in these streets would he find the man who was to lead him to the ghost of a dead gunman?

He seemed a tall, indolent figure in the saddle of the golden stallion, but his green-glinted eyes caught and registered the obscure movements in the Acme Saloon on the corner and probed into the shadows of the pile of bricks

opposite before their gaze centered on the sign farther downstreet that proclaimed in careless letters:

HUNSICKER'S LIVERY STABLE.

He slapped the sorrel's withers fondly with a strong brown hand, murmuring, "That's for you, Goldy. A good feed and a rubdown—while I hunt for an outlaw who died ten years ago."

Hatfield *chukked* softly, and Goldy pricked his ears and blew loud in the afternoon as he picked his way through Mesa's meager traffic.

Both horse and man were unaware of the proud picture they made as they threaded their way towards the stable. Gamblers, dance-hall girls and loungers waiting for the evening's life to start instinctively gave this pair their attention. They saw a magnificent golden stallion, head high and proud, his gait so effortless that it gave a sense of tremendous unleashed power. And astride him they saw a lean, sun-bronzed man with blue-black hair faintly gleaming under the tilt of his Stetson; even his ordinary bibless levis, hickory work shirt and cow-country boots failing to hide the fact that here was a man made to ride such a horse. Because Ranger Captain McDowell had indicated that this was to be an undercover mission, Jim Hatfield carried his silver star in a concealed pocket in his boot lining.

A weather-leathered old cowman standing outside the Coliseum Dance Hall said softly, "Now, there's what I'd call a horse."

One of the dance-hall girls looking out over the batwings murmured, "What a man!"

In a narrow alley between two false-fronted buildings a man tugged thoughtfully at his slim moustache, then pulled his hat down over his eyes and vanished into the farther darkness.

Turning in at Hunsicker's, Jim Hatfield swung down from the saddle, slapped Goldy's rump and turned the reins over to the hostler.

The hostler, a pleasant-faced man with red hair, said, "Grain him?"

"He deserves the best," answered Hatfield. "It's been a long trip on short rations. Where would a man likely leave a message for a friend?"

"Probably at Pop Dowling's. He runs the post-office, up on El Paso Street."

"How about a bed for the night?"

"Pop can fix you up with that too. He also serves the best likker in town, deals the most honest game and has two brand-new pool tables."

"Hold it," Hatfield said, smiling. "I've got just enough energy to eat and hit the hay."

"Pop'll take care of you," the hostler said eagerly. "You tell him I sent you."

"I'll do that," said the Ranger. He stripped his saddle bags off Goldy, threw them over his shoulder, and turned into Mesa's uncertain dusk.

POP DOWLING'S place squatted along the east side of El Paso Street, sandwiched in between Meyer's Tonsorial Parlor and the Odd Fellows Hall. Orange light lanced through the slatted doors as Jim Hatfield passed under the overhang of the wooden awning, then brightened and dimmed and brightened again as somebody adjusted the wick.

A fiddle scraped sadly next door. A woman's sharply scolding voice came from across the street and was cut off suddenly. Two riders spurred their horses around the corner and reined up at the hitch-rack in front of the Plaza Variety Theatre. El Paso, thought Hatfield, was waking up.

A balding man with shrewd eyes and tobacco-stained white moustache turned away from the Rochester lamp he was adjusting. He faced Hatfield from behind a scarred counter where a sign propped against a soap box read U.S. MAIL.

"What'll it be for you, stranger?"

"First," said Hatfield, "there might be some messages for me. Then maybe I can find a good bed and something to eat." He added then, not forgetting his promise to the hostler, "The red-headed kid at Hunsicker's told me to try here."

"In that case," said the oldster, "I reckon I can fix you up with them last two items. I don't take in everybody, but Red McGinty don't send nobody here

lessen he likes the way they jingle their spurs. Regarding the first, the message you was wondering about—you got a name?"

"Check under Hatfield," said the Ranger. "First name Jim." He had decided it was no use trying to use an alias in El Paso, as there were too many people who knew him here, and it was not uncommon for Rangers to pass through that biggest of Border towns.

Pop Dowling gave him a sharp glance. "Might have known. You even have the look of a lone wolf."

Captain "Roaring Bill" McDowell years before had pinned the title of the Lone Wolf on the tall Ranger. Not because Jim Hatfield shunned the society of other men, but because he preferred to work alone on the secret missions to which the Ranger Captain so often assigned him. And throughout the length and breadth of the Lone Star State, Jim Hatfield was known by that nickname.

"Here you are," Pop Dowling announced finally, bringing out two envelopes from the soap box. "One mailed from Austin, and the other left here with me this morning. Now I'll show you your room, and you can read them in private."

Once upstairs in the small but clean room above the bar and pool room that backed Pop Dowling's front office, Hatfield tossed his *alforjas* upon the bed and lit the coal oil lamp. A glance at the two letters told him that one was from Captain Bill McDowell and the other probably from the man he was to meet here. He opened the Ranger Captain's first and began to read, decoding as he read:

JIM HATFIELD

Jim:

This is mainly to confirm the verbal orders I gave you before you left Austin, and to fill in more of the background on the case.

The story is that there are some odd happenings around Disputa, which you will remember as the place where the river channel west of El Paso changed and left the boundary between Mexico and the U.S. in doubt. Strange gunmen have been seen in the town, just passing through or picking up supplies. The odd thing is that some of them have been recognized—as outlaws who have been dead or exiled for several years. Seems impossible, but my informant tells me that one of the men is Matt Juggins who rode with the Plummer gang in Montana, and that he is sure another is Deke Saveyard who was thought to have been killed during the Sutton-Taylor feud.

Because this boundary situation is a pretty touchy affair, neither the U.S. nor Mexico has interfered with the town or the plateau between the two river beds. And that's why I can't just send in a squad of Rangers to investigate and clear up whatever is going on there. That's why I decided to send you to El Paso to do some undercover work.

The man you are to get in touch with is vouched for as trustworthy by Don José Alverado, the *alcalde* of Disputa, who is the man who contacted me. We both thought it best to have you meet in El Paso.

Tomas Basilio, your contact, will give you the rest of the story. Good luck and good hunting.

Bill

Hatfield held the letter and envelope by one corner, swiped a match alight on the iron bedstead and watched the Ranger Captain's letter become a floating rectangle of gray ash.

The other letter was shorter. It read merely:

> Señor: I will be drinking at the Hidalgo Cantina. It is best to come soon. I think I am watched. I will know you.

The letter was not signed, but Hatfield didn't need a signature to tell him it was from Tomas Basilio. The apparent urgency of the note convinced him to change his plans. He had intended to go to the barber shop and get a bath and shave, but now he decided to head for the Hidalgo Cantina.

HE UNHOLSTERED the two Peacemakers, flicked open the loading gates and carefully checked the loads, looked at the bed with a sigh of regret and made his way back downstairs.

Pop Dowling said, "Come in the bar for a pick-up?"

"No, thanks," Hatfield replied. "No offense, but I've got business to attend to. You ever hear tell of the Hidalgo Cantina?"

"No offense taken, Ranger; I rode with Bill McDowell in the old days. The Hidalgo's just this side of the Juarez bridge. Keep your guns easy in the leather—it's one of them places where you might meet anybody."

"Even a ghost?" Hatfield said softly.

"Huh?" Pop Dowling frowned. "I don't know what you're getting at, but you might just. Yes, sir, you might just meet one of them, too."

"Adios," said Hatfield. He pushed through the slatted doors into El Paso's brawling night.

The town was full awake now. Cowpokes jingled their spurs along the plank sidewalks. Pianos and music boxes mingled their tinny tones into one vast discordant cacophony. Somebody fired a shot at the moon, and a woman's giggle floated into the night.

Hatfield made his way through this pulsing sea of life, glad that everybody was too occupied with their part in the night to notice him. He crossed Overland, stepping aside to avoid a buckboard rounding the corner—and heard then a voice that stopped him dead in the street's dust and sent the old regrets trampling wantonly through his memory.

"Jim!"

The buckboard had braked to a skidding halt, and the woman's voice was clear and warm and pleased. She sat erect on the buckboard's seat, slim and supple as she half-turned to face the Texas Ranger. Her hair, so blond that it was almost white, flowed down past her shoulders, a startling contrast to her dark eyes and her deep-toned complexion.

And, as he had that first day he met her years ago in New Orleans, Jim Hatfield caught his breath and suffered his regrets. He stepped quickly to the buckboard and swept off his hat.

"Desiree! Desiree Duveras!" He had intended to make this a casual greeting, and he was surprised at the emotion his voice betrayed.

Desiree Duveras gave him her full and frank expression, cupping her chin in doeskin-gloved hand. "You look different. I often wondered how you would look in your own country."

"Now you know. Are you disappointed?"

Desiree shook her head. "No. I'm a witch; I can see your heart."

"What do you see?" Hatfield asked, and instantly regretted the question, knowing he was treading on quicksand.

"Wanted posters," Desiree said gravely. "Wanted posters and guns and a circled star." She added then, her voice quickening, "You're not wearing your badge."

"Not tonight," said the Ranger.

"Don't put it back on again, Jim." She waited for his answer, and when it did not come said, "Breakfast tomorrow? About nine at the Magoffin?"

"I'll be there," Hatfield said. He matched her pleased smile with one of his

own, watched her flick the reins and guide the buckboard into the street's thickening traffic.

He quickened his pace toward the bridge, more shaken by this chance encounter than he cared to admit to himself. It seemed like a thousand years ago when he first met Desiree Duveras in New Orleans when he had returned a prisoner there. She was fascinated by the stories he told of gunmen, and they argued at first about Wes Hardin, whom she had met during one of his trips there and thought a romantic figure. Hatfield remembered he had told her she had been reading too many yellow-backed novels, and then later on they forgot their quarrel and went somewhere for boullabaisse and brandy, and they chased the stars from the heavens and the dawn came too soon.

Hatfield shook his head savagely. A lone wolf had no right to such thoughts. But the memories crowded upon him, and he found himself standing in front of the Hidalgo Cantina without knowing how.

Standing outside the Hidalgo's batwing doors, Hatfield was glad that he hadn't shaved and wasn't wearing his star. For although he knew he couldn't keep his identity secret in El Paso, he saw no reason to advertise it, and the Hidalgo had the look of a place where dim trails crossed and joined the sweepings of both sides of the Border. Roughly clothed as he was, the Ranger could easily be mistaken for another rider stopping by for a quick drink and a fresh horse before taking another obscure trail leading nowhere.

THE shot came without any warning of anger-pitched voices or ominous silence. The shot came from inside the cantina, its echoes rolling into one wicked roar and breaking through the batwing doors. Hatfield instinctively threw himself to one side of the door, drawing one of his Peacemakers.

There was a quick stomping of high-heeled boots and the sound of another door slamming somewhere. Then a man's voice raised in baffled anger, *"Por que?"*

Hatfield pushed through the swing doors then, holstering his gun, knowing that whatever had happened here was over for the moment. It was a pattern familiar to him in these border cantinas; a jostled arm or a sudden recognition, the deadly sibilance of blued steel on leather, the gun-thunder and a man's life draining out upon the sawdust.

His quick gaze swept the room, registering the scene immediately. The light flickering upon the gourds hanging back of the puncheon bar, the carefully neutral faces of the men seated at the crude tables, the tattered bullfight poster tacked to the rear wall. Beside the bar a man lay with his head pillowed on a crushed sombrero, and kneeling beside him an old Mexican with white hair and moustachios held a blood-reddened bandanna to the man's chest.

The wounded man painfully turned his head to look at the Texas Ranger. "Senor, I thought you would not come."

The *viejo* said quietly to Hatfield, "He is a friend of yours?"

"He is a friend of Tomas Basilio," the wounded man said.

Jim Hatfield drew a sharp, ragged breath. This was the man he was to contact. And one look at Tomas Basilio's eyes told him that he was too late.

II

The Coin

THE old Mexican came to his feet, saying with the innate politeness that breeds south of the Border, *"Señor,* there is nobody in this place who had a hand in this thing that has happened to your friend. Pedro Sanchez says this."

Hatfield said, forming his quick judgment, "I believe you, *viejo.*"

"I will send for the priest," Pedro Sanchez said and left.

"Tomas," said the Lone Wolf, "I am

sorry I was late. Have you any strength to talk?"

"*Si, Señor,* I can talk. The *viejo* speaks truth." Tomas Basilio's voice was no more than a whisper, and Hatfield hunkered down beside him to catch the faint words. "This man who shot me is an *Americano.* He is a man I do not know, but he has a scar like a V over one eye, and he gave the *viejo* a strange coin for his drink." Tomas's voice dropped huskily and a slight cough brought pink foam to his lips.

"That is enough," said Hatfield.

The dying man drew a short, painful breath. "The *ladinos* have a spy here who pointed his finger at me for the *Americano.* I have found out that they are to meet at midnight tonight at the *Arbol de los Mesajes.* This spy, he is a *mestizo* who once worked for Don Alverado, I think.' His head fell back and he gasped hard for wind and then said, "Tell Don José I did my best," and Hatfield watched the life leave him.

Pedro Sanchez returned then, saying, "I have sent somebody for the priest. You will see that your *amigo* is taken care of?"

"I will see to that," Hatfield replied. "There is something you can do for me, Pedro."

"My business it is a small one, *señor.* It would become yet smaller if it were known that Pedro Sanchez answered questions of *extranos.*"

Hatfield wondered if he should show his Ranger badge, then decided against it. It would probably make Pedro Sanchez more reluctant than ever to talk, and he doubted that the old Mexican could give him much more information than he had already. "No questions, *viejo.* But my *amigo* said you perhaps had a strange coin in your cash box. I would like to see it."

Pedro Sanchez shrugged his shoulders. "Why not?" He stepped behind the bar and in a moment tossed a coin upon the scarred planks.

Hatfield picked up the coin, turning it slowly between his fingers. "Francisco Pizarro," he murmured.

"Even if I knew him, *señor,*" said Pedro, "I would not say."

"He is dead. He died a long time ago."

"In that case," said Pedro, "I think I knew him, *si.*"

"In that case," said Hatfield, "you are older than the hills."

"I sometimes think so, *amigo.* Will you give me a peso in exchange for *Señor* Pizarro?"

"I will give you two pesos," Hatfield replied. He dug into his levis and brought out two 'dobe dollars. It was a good bargain. He knew that somehow this Peruvian two-sol piece was a link to the ghosts that walked in Disputa.

AFTER making arrangements for the dead man, Hatfield made his way back to Pop Dowling's, piecing together as he walked the story of what had happened. Somehow Tomas Basilio during his stay in El Paso had stumbled on to the fact that the man with the scar was one of the gunmen headed for Disputa. Maybe, Hatfield thought, through seeing the man use the odd coins in other deadfalls. Or maybe—*quien sabe*—he heard some talk about the coins and hung around until he saw the man who used them. But Tomas was also being followed by somebody who must have had some idea what he was up to. And the spy pointed Tomas out to the gunman.

The Texas Ranger could think of no outlaw who had that type of scar. But it could, of course, have been a recent scar. There was one man who might remember. His thoughts were in a jumble by the time he reached Pop Dowling's place.

Pop looked up from his *El Paso Times* and said softly, "Find your ghost?"

"Maybe," said Hatfield. "Pop, you carried a law badge for a long time, and Red McGinty says you know everybody who ever lived. You ever come across an hombre from up north who had a V-shaped scar over one eye?"

Pop Dowling grunted. "Might have, but it wouldn't do you much good, Ranger. One of Quantrell's men named Luke Pease had a scar like that. Threw some wide loops around the San Saba country

after the war, then rode with Cullen Baker's gang until the vigilantes chased him out. Heard he took a boat for South America after that—Bolivia or Peru or some such place. Likely he cashed in his checks down there."

"Not all of them," the Lone Wolf said gently.

"Huh?"

Hatfield took out the two-sol piece and flipped it upon the counter. "Here's one he didn't cash in there."

"Hell," said the old ex-Ranger after he inspected the coin, "this can mean something or nothing. You see 'em around once in a while—money from Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia. Bartenders will take any money so long as it's hard and rings true."

"Man with a V scar over his eye gave it to a bartender tonight," said Hatfield. "It adds up."

"Damn funny," said Pop Dowling. "Now what?"

"Is there a place called Arbol de los Mesajes?"

"The Message Tree?" Pop Dowling nodded. "That would be the old cottonwood down El Paso Street near the *acequia*, about where Pioneer cuts in. Not hardly used any more, but before the war it was sort of a town bulletin board. Then the owlhooters used it sometimes. Ain't used now any more, except sometimes by young lovers who want to arrange meetings."

"I don't reckon this will be a lover's meeting," Hatfield said dryly. He glanced at the clock that ticked loudly on the back shelf. "Pop, you can do me a favor. It's about nine now, and I can use some shuteye. I'd take it kindly if you'd wake me about eleven-thirty. I'm going to make a little pasear and if I don't show up by daylight, better tell the town marshal to come looking for me."

He went up to his room, shucked himself of guns and boots and stretched out upon the bed. He fell instantly asleep.

It seemed like he had just closed his eyes when Pop Dowling shook him by the shoulders. "Eleven-thirty, Jim."

A lifetime in the open and years of hard training with the Texas Rangers had accustomed Jim Hatfield to become instantly wide-awake and alert upon being aroused. Before Pop Dowling had the kerosene lamp lit, Hatfield had pulled on his boots, strapped on his guns, splashed cold water upon his face from the porcelain bowl and was ready to go.

He said to Dowling, "Is there a way out without going downstairs by the front office?"

"There sure is, Jim. At the end of the hall there's a window with a ladder going down the back end. I made it for a fire escape. Just follow me."

Hatfield swung his legs over the window sill Pop led him to, and in a few moments he was in the alley behind the building. He made his way toward the *acequia*, following the alleyways and the less busy streets, and shortly after the town petered out he hit the bank of the *acequia* and sighted the lone cottonwood tree that had acted as a message exchange for so many years in El Paso. He settled himself in a thick clump of sunflowers nearby and waited.

He had no doubt that Luke Pease would meet somebody here tonight to report on the killing of Tomas Basilio and maybe get further instructions.

He watched from the deep shadows of the sunflowers, seeing nobody, his thoughts going immediately to his chance meeting with Desiree Duveras, and his pulse quickened when he remembered he was to meet her again for breakfast. He murmured, "Got to take a bath and shave," and wondered whether he could get the wrinkles out of his spare shirt.

HE WAS thus considering when he heard the first faint whisper of footsteps crushing the dry grass, and in a few moments a man's tall figure took shape near the tree, silhouetted against the moon's paleness. Hatfield held his breath. Was this one of the men he was waiting for, or merely a wandering cowpoke taking a walk to sober up?

He watched the man stroll casually past the tree, apparently ignoring it; he wished

the moon were in the right position so he could see the man's face. Then the dim figure circled the tree and lost itself in this larger shadow, and in a moment a match flared briefly and made a wide, glowing arc in the darkness..

That's a signal, Hatfield thought, for the light had not remained stationary long enough to light a cigarette. He wondered if he should take this man now, and immediately discarded the idea; he didn't know which one it was, and maybe he could learn more if he could hear some of the conversation.

After a few minutes he heard the man grumble impatiently and another match flared and swung in a slow half-circle. This time it was answered by a similar small glow of fire from the *acequia* bank, and another dim figure, smaller and slighter than the first, approached the tree.

The two men were only a few yards away from Hatfield's hiding place, and the Texas Ranger could barely hear their low voices.

"Took you long enough," one of the men growled.

"I wanted to be sure, *amigo*." This man's voice had a Mexican accent. "You took care of that little job of work at the Hidalgo?"

"Easy. But there ain't no use telling all of El Paso about it. Always a chance somebody's ears are flapping."

"There is only one to fear, *amigo*. That is this Texas Ranger who arrived today. And I know for a certainty that he is fast asleep now."

"I still don't like it, my friend. And I didn't like the idea of you wishing off that job on me, either. How come you didn't take care of it yourself?"

"This *hombre* knew me. I was not able to get close enough to him. Are you sure he died without talking?"

"Didn't hang around to see. But I dusted both sides, and I reckon I've shot enough men to know my business. None of them *pelados* in that place would be worth him talking to, anyway."

"*Bueno*. For I think, *amigo*, that he has followed me here before and figured out that this was the meeting place."

"He won't follow no more. What's the next move?"

"You will leave in the morning for Disputa. There you will find a cantina called 'The Wounded Bull.' The bartender will make some remark about a journey, and you will reply to him that one goes and one returns. Then he will see that you are guided to the others."

"About those others—who are they? Anybody I know?"

"There are many, *amigo*. There will be Deke Saveyard, who is the *segundo*. And Hawk Jesperson, who rode with Billy the Kid. And Matt Juggins from the Plummer gang in Montana. Dutch John and Bass Ives. And Wiley Harpe and Jim Cummins and Lige Briant. You know any of them, *Señor* Pease?"

Jim Hatfield, listening attentively, gave an involuntary gasp upon hearing these names. It was a roll-call of outlaws and killers, long thought to be dead or exiled, that every lawman in the west knew to be as dangerous as so many coiled rattlesnakes.

"No," Luke Pease said. "Most of them were a little before my time or ranged in different territory. Heard of them all, though, and I'm sure glad I'm going to be with them instead of against them!"

"If you know none of them, then you will need the note the boss sent you. You have it?"

"Right here. Thought you were riding out with me, though."

"No. I must wait to watch this Texas Ranger and see what are his plans. When he leaves, then I will ride back. If you have no more questions, *amigo*, let us leave this place."

Jim Hatfield quietly rose to a crouching position. It was too dark to try to take both men here, but if he followed them into town he should be able to get the drop on them.

"You better go first," Luke Pease said. "Won't do to take any chances of us being seen together. I'll wait for the space of a cigarette and then come along."

"That is wise, *amigo*."

Hatfield was answered by orange flame, and lead sang its deadly song above him

Hatfield saw the smaller shape break away from the tree and move straight towards his hiding place. He held his breath, not even daring to risk the small sound of drawing his gun. But the man merely brushed the edge of the sunflower clump, giving it the briefest of glances, and passed on.

The Lone Wolf did some quick thinking. Following this man would put Luke Pease behind him, and his chance of getting either one wouldn't be any better than that of filling an inside straight. He'd have to let the Mexican go, and take his chances of getting the drop on Luke Pease. And it would be best to wait until the last minute, giving the Mexican time to get beyond hearing range in case this called for some gunplay.

He settled back, watching Luke Pease light a cigarette, watching the tiny red glow brighten and dim repeatedly as the outlaw silently smoked. When he figured the cigarette was about smoked through he knew the time was here.

Hatfield came slowly to his feet, feeling the tall sunflower stems give to his body. Even then he deliberately waited, selecting just that right moment when the man's shape would be away from the tree's shadow. He wanted to take Luke Pease alive. And even at ten paces the shooting would be bad with this moon against him.

He knew he could delay no longer. He stepped out from the sunflowers, hearing their ghostly rustle behind him. He said, his voice carrying clear and cool, "Raise 'em high, mister," and his guns were in his fists as he spoke.

He was answered by orange flame, and lead sang its deadly song above him. He hit the dirt then, swearing to himself for failing to realize that the reactions of a long-hunted gunman would be like lightning. He fired once at the flashes as he struck the ground, then rolled quickly to one side and saw the flash and heard the answering bullet *thunk* into the spot he

had just left.

He caught a brief glimpse of the gunman in the flare of that last shot, a tall fighting shape, cold and hard, a frozen meteor outlined in smouldering mists. And for a moment he felt a reluctant admiration —until he remembered the brutal murder of Tomas Basilio, and then anger shut out this wayward thought. A coldness came over him as though he rested in the bowels of a freezing cloud; his guns spat out their deadly fire and he felt a high, wild exultation with each leaping flame and echoing roar.

Somewhere in this sharp fury he heard the gunman's angry and incredulous cry, and he saw the tall shape break in the middle and pitch forward. He came to his feet and stood there in this restless silence a moment before holstering his guns.

He walked over to the gunman then and turned him face up and lit a match. A V-shaped scar stood out white above the man's left eye, removing any doubt in the Ranger's mind that this could be the notorious lieutenant of Cullen Baker. But Hatfield also knew that he had failed, for Luke Pease could do no talking now.

III

Trip to Disputa

THE Texas Ranger methodically searched the body of Luke Pease from boots to Stetson. He found a few more Peruvian coins, a sack of Duke's, and little else of importance. A money belt circled the gunman's middle, and Hatfield noticed that the greenbacks were all new. But tucked into a cartridge loop Hatfield found a slip of paper. Lighting a match, the Ranger read the fine handwriting:

This man is one of ours.

There was no signature, but evidently whoever got the note would recognize the handwriting.

So far, in El Paso's turbulent night, the brief gunfight hadn't attracted enough attention to bring anybody to the scene. But Hatfield knew he should report this to the local authorities. He stuffed the note into his shirt pocket, already coming to a decision. Why shouldn't Luke Pease still go to Disputa? The outlaw and the Ranger were of the same size and coloring, the only difference being the scar, and that could be taken care of. Since Luke Pease knew none of the outlaw bunch, there should be little or no danger of the masquerade being detected.

He dragged Pease's body into the clump of sunflowers and made his way back into town and the Marshal's office.

Worth DeSpain, El Paso's Marshal, listened incredulously to Hatfield's story, then shook his head saying, "I can't believe it, Hatfield. Why would Luke Pease come back to Texas? His hide isn't worth two cents here."

"That's what I intend to find out," said the Ranger. "Will you co-operate with me on this?"

"I'm always ready to give a hand to the Rangers," the Marshal replied. "All right, I'll send a couple men and a wagon for the body, and I'll see that they keep mum about it. As far as anybody in the town will know, it was just an unknown saddle-tramp who was killed. Far as that goes, I don't reckon anybody will ask questions anyway. Dead men ain't exactly a novelty in El Paso."

"Someday they will be," said Hatfield. "Now, is there a stage going to Disputa?"

"There's a mud wagon taking mail once a week up that way. Next one will be tomorrow morning, about eight o'clock. Slow trip, though, and I think probably Pease would have gone horseback."

"He will," said Hatfield.

Worth DeSpain took his cigar from his mouth and frowned. "What do you mean?"

"This," Hatfield said. "Luke Pease is leaving in the morning. And Pease will arrive there about when expected. But I've got reason to think I'm being watched, and if I should disappear about the same time Pease leaves it would look mighty

funny, and I think they'd be more on the alert."

"I follow your reasoning, Hatfield, but just how do you plan to do this?"

"Like this," Hatfield went on. "I find a man I can trust and have him ride Goldy tonight to the first way station. I'll leave here as Hatfield on the mud wagon, then pick up my horse at the way station and ride into Disputa as Luke Pease. That way they won't be expecting Hatfield for a time yet, and I'll have a day or so to do some prowling around."

"Might work," Worth DeSpain said. "Who you got in mind to take your horse to the way station?"

"Hadn't come to that yet," said Hatfield. "I thought maybe you'd know somebody. Only people I've met so far are Pop Dowling and the kid at Hunsicker's Livery."

"Red McGinty? There's a good boy, Hatfield. His father was a deputy of mine before he died. You can trust him. I'll go down there and talk to him myself. I reckon you'll want to get what sleep you can before morning."

"It's been a busy day," the Ranger admitted. "But I'm not done yet. You got a good doctor around?"

"Sure. Two or three—if they're not too busy patching up bullet holes in El Paso citizens. Why a doctor?"

"I need a scar," Hatfield said quietly. "I need a faint V-shaped scar over my left eye."

"Come along," said Worth DeSpain. "We'll see Doc Rhodes."

DOCTOR RHODES took a step back from the chair where Jim Hatfield sat and narrowed his eyes. "Never did a job like this before, but for a first try it isn't bad. A medical man would notice it right away, but I think it will fool anybody who doesn't know. Hurt much?"

Jim Hatfield grinned. "If I had to have two of them, I wouldn't go through with it."

Doc Rhodes snorted. "You lawmen all are alike. Take a couple bullet holes and it don't bother you any. But a scratch and a little skin bleach and anybody would think you were going through hell's fire."

Hatfield said, smiling, "Do you think I'll live?"

"For a couple days," Worth DeSpain answered him, and there was no humor in his voice. "For a couple of days, my friend."

After making his way back up Pop Dowling's back ladder to his room, Hatfield suddenly remembered that he had promised to have breakfast with Desiree Duveras that morning. He fell asleep thinking about her.

As tired as he was, the Texas Ranger woke from long habit at dawn. While shaving with hot water brought by Pop Dowling's swamper, he inspected his newly-made scar in the mirror. It was good enough, he thought, but he made a mental note to keep his hat pulled down until he was out of town. A watcher noticing it might get ideas as to what the Lone Wolf was up to.

Before strapping on his guns he took pencil and paper from his saddle-bags and wrote a note to Desiree Duveras, telling her that he regretted business wouldn't let him keep their breakfast date. He'd leave it at the hotel while waiting for the stage.

Coming out of Pop Dowling's, *alforjas* thrown over his shoulder and hat pulled firmly down, Hatfield stopped off at a little cafe on San Antonio Street and ate a hearty breakfast of steak, eggs and coffee. At the West Texas Stage Line office in the lobby of the Magoffin Hotel he bought his ticket to Disputa, avoiding the clerk's surprised questions, then found a copy of the *El Paso Times* and settled himself in a chair. Apparently immersed in the newspaper, he was really observing with the thoroughness of long experience the lobby's scattered traffic.

When the driver, a whiskery old man with a wooden leg, came in to announce the stage, Hatfield left his note to Desiree at the room clerk's window, then followed the driver outside.

The mud wagon, a smaller version of the Concord but having just a canvas top and sides, had two hard wooden seats,

both facing forward, and Hatfield knew from experience that neither was more uncomfortable than the other. Since he discovered that he was the only passanger, he said to the man, "All right to come up on top?"

The driver nodded and spat a brown stream into San Antonio's dust. "Sure, pardner. I get sorta tired talking to them mules a whole trip. Climb aboard."

Hatfield tossed his *alforjas* into the front boot, stepped to the wheel and then up on the driver's seat. From this position he watched a dark man with a thin moustache came from the shadows beside the hotel and walk rapidly towards the telegraph office across the street. Somebody was going to learn that the Lone Wolf was on his way to Disputa.

The driver took an old Horologe from his vest pocket and gave it a long glance. "Runs faster than this here mud wagon," he muttered. "Says it's nine-eighteen, which means it's just eight o'clock. We never get nowhere on time, but we always start on time. All right, you long-eared sons of Belial! Eeee-yaaah!"

Watching El Paso fade into the morning mist, Jim Hatfield turned over his plans in his mind, checking to see if he had made any slips. He could have pretended that he was giving up the case and going back to Austin, but this would have been too obvious a subterfuge. Re-checking the route with Joel Waggoner, the driver, Hatfield found out that this route was mostly for the mail, circling away from El Paso and through the Hueco Pass, then down along the western slopes of the Sierra Diablo to Van Horn Wells, skirting the foothills of Beach Mountain and passing over the crumbling backbone of the Carrizo Range. Somewhere past this latter place lay Disputa.

It was a long way around by the mud wagon, explained Joel Waggoner, taking four days to make the complete trip. Disputa was at about the half-way mark, and Waggoner reckoned they'd reach there some time tomorrow evening. Hatfield didn't tell him that he was planning to leave the stage at the first way station, which would be at the Hueco Tanks some twenty miles east of El Paso. From there Hatfield figured that on Goldy, and taking a short cut, he could be in Disputa in five hours' time. Provided, he thought, that nothing had happened to Red McGinty in the meantime!

ABOUT mid-afternoon, the sun slanting down at their backs, Joel Waggoner pointed with his whip and said, "There's the pass yonder. We swing north before we reach it and head for the tanks. Be there in about an hour.

"Won't be too soon for me," said the Lone Wolf. He started to add something more when suddenly he caught the glint of metal in a clump of mesquite lining the trail. There was no time to warn Waggoner, and Hatfield jerked the reins from the old driver's hands, yelling, "Whoa! Whoa!"

The rifle shot split the still air as the span of mules reared back and the mud wagon creaked to a jolting halt. Joel Waggoner, no stranger to road ambushes and reacting instantly, applied the foot brake violently with his wooden leg. The shot thudded into the brake lever, splintering it, then whined wickedly away.

"He was leading us!" Hatfield shouted, and jumped down from the seat, snatching up Joel Waggoner's Winchester from the top deck. "Hit the boot, driver!"

Another shot from the mesquite echoed into the wake of the last as Hatfield hit the dirt and scrambled to a crouching position behind one of the wheels. He knew that the hidden drygulcher had been taken by surprise by the mud wagon's sudden halt. This was a trick Hatfield had learned from an old whip the Ranger had known in Austin.

Hatfield pumped a quick shot towards the mesquite, not taking time for dead aim, but merely to keep the bushwacker's head down. Then he left that place in a hurry, shifting to a stance beside the rear boot, Winchester over the sloping canvas cover. Another shot spewed the dirt underneath the wagon, and then Hatfield heard the answering roar of a Dragoon Colt, and he knew that Joel Waggoner

had come into action from the front boot. It was long range shooting for a hand gun, but it would keep the drygulcher's targets split, and the Texas Ranger was glad he had a wise old hand siding him.

The drygulcher's shots had stopped now, and Hatfield knew the man was busy considering his next move. The fight would be at a stalemate unless the ambusher could be flanked, and the Lone Wolf, making a quick but expert survey of the ground, thought he knew the way. He stepped back then, calling "Waggoner!" and tossed the Winchester in a high arc towards the front boot.

He saw one of Waggoner's big hands grab the rifle out of the air, and he heard the driver shout, "Good hunting!" and knew the old whip understood. He dived for the cover of a talus boulder that flanked the road, heard the Winchester's sharp spat and knew that Waggoner would keep the ambusher busy.

The road made a dip here where a dry wash fanned out from the rise where the mesquite-hidden ambusher lay waiting. Once across the road, a few scattered boulders made a zig-zag pattern on either side of the wash along which, with luck, a man could come out above the bushwhacker. It was a good hundred-yard course, and the wash wasn't deep enough for full cover, but Hatfield thought that with Waggoner's covering fire he could make it.

He called, "Turn 'em loose, Waggoner!" and made a crouching run across the road, throwing himself into the wash's shallowness as he heard the Winchester's angry voice. A bullet sang above his head, and the Winchester replied again. Hatfield sprang up again, making a crouching run to a boulder farther up the rise. The Winchester in Waggoner's hands kept up a methodical and even firing, kicking up dirt around the ambusher's hiding place. Hatfield, not pausing now, half-ran and half-stumbled along his uneven trail. He was within twenty-five yards of his unknown enemy when he heard Joel Waggoner's, "Eeeee-yaiih!" and turned his head to see the old driver throw the Winchester high into the air.

The Texas Ranger knew what that meant; Waggoner was out of ammunition, and the rest was up to Hatfield.

He was within sixgun range now, and he drew his Peacemakers under cover of a sun-heated boulder. He knew he'd have to bring the unseen gulcher out into the open, and he instantly considered and rejected the time-worn tricks of tossing a rock or putting his hat on a stick. The rifleman had showed himself too smart for those old dodges.

There was only one chance, and that was to work his way along the wash until he came up behind the man's position. It would be almost all open ground all the way, but it was a chance he had to take.

He made his run then, the loose gravel of the wash sliding underneath his boot-heels, and the roar of the gulcher's gun beating against his ears. Lead plucked at his sleeve, and another shot scarred his gunbelt. He turned then, Peacemakers blazing, that strange detached calmness that always came upon him in a gunfight holding him in its grip. He saw the drygulcher leap to his feet with a twisting motion and lever a shell into the chamber of his rifle.

The bullet tore one of Hatfield's guns from his hand, the shock of it running up his arm. He held his breath, hoping his count was right, and felt a triumphal upsurge when he saw the man throw the rifle away and reach for his hand gun. For this was one of the things Hatfield had counted upon—that he'd caught the gulcher without time to reload.

"Drop it!" he called, and knew at once that this was a useless command.

He made his aim and took his shot then, and the world stood still for a moment. Then the man's knees buckled and his mouth opened and he sank slowly to the ground.

Hatfield called, "All right, Waggoner!" and he walked forward to have his look. It was the dark *mestizo*-looking man whom Hatfield had noticed at the time he got on the mud wagon back in El Paso.

IV

Strange Hatred

JOEL WAGGONER looked down at the would-be drygulcher. Turning to Hatfield, he said dryly, "Personal friend?"

"Sure," replied the Ranger. "He always clowns around like that." He hunkered down, probing the drygulcher's shoulder wound with gentle fingers. He was a fairly young Mexican, small-boned and wristed and with a carefully trimmed moustache. Lying there with his eyes closed he looked like a sleeping boy, and Hatfield wondered again what there was in men that made them turn killer.

Waggoner asked, "Buzzard bait?"

"No," said Hatfield. He took off his kerchief and with expert fingers bound the wound. "He's just out for a while. Grab his feet and we'll carry him back to the wagon."

Together they carried the man down the hill to the mud wagon and propped him against the rear seat. Waggoner dug some strips of rawhide out of the rear boot and bound the Mexican's hands and feet, while Hatfield removed the man's gun belt and a small derringer he found in a pocket of the charro jacket.

"He'll keep a while," Joel said, testing his ties. "What do you reckon to do with him?"

"Leave him at the way station until we can get word to El Paso to have him picked up."

"I'd have left him where he lay," Waggoner said disgustedly, and walked toward the front to check his mules.

With the way station in sight, Waggoner drawled, "Since your friend's clowning near got me killed, I'd like to know what the joke was, my friend."

"You've earned the right to know," the Texas Ranger replied. He reached into his left boot and palmed out his badge, showing it to Waggoner.

"Should of known," Waggoner grunted. "And right now I'll wager I can guess your name. You're Jim Hatfield, the one they call the Lone Wolf. That hombre we got hog-tied back there was sent to keep you from going to Disputa, eh?"

Hatfield nodded and gave the driver the gist of what had happened, cautioning him to say nothing to anybody else.

"Thought something funny was going on in Disputa," said Waggoner. "I don't stay there no more than long enough to pick up and deliver the mail; but I noticed the last couple trips that the people seem kind of spooky, and last time I seen a couple gun-hung hombres going into the cantina they call The Wounded Bull."

So that was it, Hatfield thought. The remark by Waggoner cleared up part of the cryptic scribbling on the note he had found in Luke Pease's pocket. The Wounded Bull cantina was no doubt the contact point for the returned outlaws, and he guessed now that the phrase *one returns* was a password. That would make things easier, the Texas Ranger told himself, and he fingered the Peruvian coin he had obtained from Pedro Sanchez.

"Here we are," Waggoner announced suddenly, breaking into Hatfield's thoughts, and the mud wagon pulled up beside a low adobe building.

The Hueco Tanks way station squatted among a great scattering of giant rocks that made a confused and obscure pattern as far as Hatfield's eye could reach. Erosion of the soft granite surface had formed cavities in which pools of rainwater were caught and held. For ages past, the Lone Wolf mused, wild animals, prehistoric man and Indians must have used this area as a watering place and fortress.

The way station itself consisted of the low-roofed adobe building with weather-cracked *vegas*, a couple of sheds and a corral. Hatfield saw no sign of Goldy, and his first thought was that Red McGinty somehow hadn't made it. He told himself, letting out an exasperated breath from between clenched teeth, that he should have checked on that personally instead of leaving it to El Paso's marshal.

A short, bow-legged man with a smile that belied his fierce black moustache came out to greet them. "Joel, you old goat, you're late again!"

"Kind of people I meet on the road," growled Waggoner, "I'm blamed lucky I got here at all! Afore you start unspanning them desert canaries, give us a hand with this sad specimen of the Lord's work here in the back seat."

Jim Hatfield swung down from the seat, concern tightening his voice. "You seen anything of a red-headed kid riding a big sorrel stallion?"

"Sure thing," said Mack Collins. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Horse is in the special stall I got attached to the back of the 'dobe. Didn't want to put him in with the knobheads. The kid is stretched out on a blanket by the stall door. Said he wouldn't leave him until the horse's owner came. Say, by the look of you, you must be the man he meant."

"This here is Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger," cut in Joel Waggoner. "Some of his friend's ain't very nice, but if I wanted somebody to ride the river with, I'd pick him."

"Glad to meet you, Ranger," said Mack Collins, shaking hands with Hatfield. "What will we do with that sorry-looking hombre in the back seat?"

"If it's all right with you, I'd like to leave him here a spell. If Waggoner will wire the sheriff's office when he gets to Van Horn Wells they should send somebody to pick him up in a day or two. Maybe Red McGinty will stay here to guard him."

"Suits me," said Collins. "He don't look right now like he'll give anybody no trouble. I had a little doctoring experience, and I'll dig that slug out of his shoulder and patch him up. Nothing much else to do here anyway."

"Fine," smiled the Ranger, and glanced at the Mexican who was still unconscious. "Let's move him inside then."

AFTER locking the drygulcher in an unused supply room, Waggoner and Collins went out to take care of the mules and take a look at the splintered brake lever. Jim Hatfield immediately made his way to Goldy's stall. The big stallion had been with the lawman throughout his career, and the bond between them was strong.

Red McGinty awakened, rubbing his eyes, as Hatfield approached, and said ruefully, "Reckon I must have dozed off."

"You deserved a rest," the Ranger said gravely, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder as Red McGinty stood up. "You did a good job."

The boy flushed with pleasure. The El Paso marshal had told him who he was making this trip for, and the praise of the famous Texas Ranger was something to make anybody stand a little straighter.

"Easy when you have a good horse," Red McGinty said, deepening his voice. "He even seemed to know where he was going."

From the stall came a welcoming nicker that told Hatfield Goldy had recognized his voice, and the great golden stallion thrust his head through the upper gate. Hatfield went over to scratch behind the stallion's ears, and felt Goldy's soft nose nuzzle his arm. He gave the big horse a couple of lumps of sugar he had saved from breakfast this morning, and smiled when he heard Goldy whicker his thanks.

Mack Collins came to the back door then, calling, "Come and get it, or I'll throw it away!"

Collins had steaming coffee, fried steaks and potatoes ready for them in the 'dobe's cool front room. Hatfield fell to with an appetite that surprised him, not realizing until now how much he needed this replenishment of energy. After the third cup of coffee he felt that he could relax again, but knew that there was still a long trip for him and Goldy to make and work to be done.

He asked Collins, tilting back his chair, "Any signs from our prisoner?"

"Groaned a couple times while you were out back. I brought him some water and a little food. Reckon he's able to talk, if you want to ask him some questions."

"I've got plenty of questions," the Lone

Wolf said grimly. "Let's go see if he has any answers."

The Mexican's eyes were narrowed and defiant as Hatfield pushed the door open. He was seated on a rawhide-laced bunk, one hand gripping his wounded shoulder.

"You feeling—" began the Texas Ranger, and then broke off as some thin thread of warning brushed his consciousness. He caught the tell-tale flicker of desperate lights in the Mexican's eyes, and saw the man's good arm straighten in a snapping motion. He made a rapid sideways stride, at the same instant seeing the flash and hearing the deadly sibilance of steel sweeping the air.

His Peacemaker was palmed as the knife thudded into the door frame and quivered there with its soft-dying song.

"*Mal suerte,*" said the Mexican impassively. "Bad luck."

Hatfield holstered his gun. "Good luck for you, hombre, that you missed. *Como se llama?* What's your name?"

"I am nameless," the Mexican said in Spanish.

"You may die that way," said Hatfield. He beckoned to Joel Waggoner, standing behind him. "I forgot to look for a neck sheath. Take a look to see he isn't carrying any more of those toothpicks."

Waggoner stepped around him and made a thorough search of the Mexican while Hatfield stood watching with his hand on gun butt. Turning away, he shrugged and said, "He's clean now, Ranger. But if you want to know who he is, you might take a look at that knife sticking in the doorway. A Mex *ladino* will often get his name engraved on his *belduque.*"

Hatfield, still watching the Mexican, reached across his shoulder and pulled the knife from the wood. Waggoner was right; Hatfield read the finely engraved letters, *Carlos Vierra,* and on the other side a motto, which Hatfield translated slowly, "My bite is deep."

"Got his teeth pulled now," Waggoner said happily.

"All right," said Hatfield. "Your name is Carlos Vierra. Who sent you to drygulch me, Vierra?"

"Nobody," Vierra replied fiercely.

"He's a damn liar," Waggoner growled. "Give me that knife and I'll carve some truth out of him."

"Wait a minute," Hatfield said, frowning. There was something in the tone of Carlos Vierra's voice that made Hatfield feel the man was telling the truth. "Listen, Vierra. Tomorrow the law will bring you back to El Paso, *sabe*? It might go a little easier on you if you told the truth."

THE Ranger waited a moment, studying Vierra's face. Then he took a shot in the dark. "Do you mean the Ones Returned did not tell you to drygulch me after you wired them I was coming?"

Carlos Vierra drew a surprised breath and shifted his gaze. "I see you know much, *señor.* But I had no orders to kill you. I am proud to say that was my own idea. I regret much that I failed."

Joel Waggoner gulped, almost swallowing his tobacco. "Well, I'll be damned! The way that skinny little *ladino* says that, cussed if I don't believe him myself."

Hatfield turned the *belduque* slowly in his fingers, saying gently, "Why, Vierra? Did you think you would get more blood-money? Or can you hate me that much—when you didn't even know me?"

Vierra's features stiffened. "I had no thought of money, Tejano." His eyes flamed and became a scorching turbulence. "This desire I have to kill you is a personal matter. I will say no more, except that I am sorry I failed. The third time will be different."

"Let me go to work on him!" Waggoner pleaded. "A Ranger can't do it, but there ain't nobody to court-martial me."

"Let it go," said Hatfield, shaking his head. "We've found out what we wanted to know. His own personal hates aren't important to us."

But Hatfield shut and locked the door behind him in a dark mood. Why *did* Carlos Vierra bear such a hate for him? As far as Hatfield knew, he had never killed or jailed anybody with that same

last name; and there was something about Vierra's deadly hatred that seemed to go beyond a mere desire for vengeance for family or friend. And there had been more than hatred in the Mexican's tone; there was something deeper and darker that Hatfield couldn't put his finger on. He pushed these thoughts back into a far corner of his mind to let them brood there. Right now there was work to be done.

He made arrangements with Red McGinty to stay and guard Vierra until the deputies from El Paso could pick him up, diplomatically side-stepping the boy's plea to come along and join the Rangers.

"In a couple more years when you're old enough," Hatfield explained carefully, "I'll vouch for you to Captain Bill McDowell. You can count on that."

He wrote out a telegram for Joel Waggoner to send from Van Horn Wells to El Paso, and another one to go to the Ranger Captain in Austin. Then, with some jerky and biscuits given to him by Mack Collins, he went out to saddle Goldy.

The big stallion seemed to know he was going into action, pawing and champing impatiently as Hatfield tightened the cinches and slipped the bridle straps over his ears. Hatfield climbed aboard, glad to be back in the saddle again instead of riding the hard seat of the mud wagon. Goldy, needing no command, wheeled around the way station's corner at an easy lope.

Hatfield turned briefly to wave *adios* to the two men and the boy standing in the doorway of the way station, briefly wondering if he would see them again.

Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger, was leaving Hueco Tanks. Luke Pease, outlaw and gunslinger would arrive tonight in Disputa!

V

Surprise Visit

JIM HATFIELD held Goldy to a course leading almost due south, letting the great stallion pace himself for the most part. The intelligent sorrel had an almost clairvoyant sense of destination and distance, and Hatfield rarely had to use voice or reins. The Huecos faded mistily behind his left shoulder, and eastward the Sierra Diablos reared and broke the frame of heaven.

Late that afternoon they skirted the Missions of Socorro and San Elizario, watering under the white walls of the *Capilla* at this latter place. They cut in closer to the Rio Grande then, and with the sun wheeling over the edge of the world Hatfield pulled Goldy up atop a rise that overlooked the village of Disputa.

"Let's stop and have a look," the Lone Wolf murmured, patting Goldy's flank.

The little Mexican village squatted on the Texas side of the Rio Grande at a point where the river turned sharply to the east, the start of a long arc that fell gently southward a few miles along. Below the town a wooden bridge spanned the river, fairly narrow at this point, crossing into Mexican territory. Downstream a ways the south bank seemed to rise steeply then level off and slope gently downward again.

"Must be a dam," Hatfield mused, and his gaze swung southward, following a thin line of cottonwood trees that marked the course of the dry riverbed the dam had cut off. The old bed made an arc complimenting the present crescent in which the Rio Grande now flowed, cupping between them a vast expanse of higher ground that reminded Hatfield of a miniature Llano Estacado. There was no sign of life that he could see, except for a faint spiraling of smoke from somewhere near the *llano's* center.

Satisfied that he had at least a general idea of this country, the Texas Ranger prepared to mount and ride into the village. Then, remembering Captain Bill McDowell's admonitions, he checked himself, letting Goldy's reins drop again. With the situation so touchy here there was no sense in taking the chance of anybody discovering his Ranger's badge and commission. He did not anticipate being searched, but there was always that pos-

sibility that despite his disguise as Luke Pease one of the outlaw gang might become suspicious. And there was even that chance that crossing the Border, he might be halted by a posse of *Rurales* who would welcome the chance to make things rough for a trespassing American lawman.

Removing his badge and commission from the lining of his boot, he wrapped them carefully in a strip of oiled slicker cloth and placed them under a flat rock by the side of the trail. He would know where they were when it was time for Luke Pease, eyebrow-scarred gunslick, to change back to Jim Hatfield.

Mounting Goldy again, this small chore finished, he *chukked* softly and rode into Disputa.

A few scattered *jacals* marked the outermost limits of this Border town. The road made a core along which they grouped themselves roughly, but there was no other discernible pattern or shape to their siting. Cooking fires, small flames of a sensible and thrifty people, lent their soft glow to the dusk and filled the air with the aromatic scent of *piñon*. And as Hatfield passed, children playing by the roadside stared at him with wide curious eyes until their mothers called to them sharply and then watched him pass in silence.

Toward the town's center square adobes began to take the place of the mud-chinked pole uprights of the *jacals*, and by the time Hatfield reached the *plaza*, plank sidewalks fronted the buildings. A soft wind soaring in from the Diablos whispered through the alamo trees and lifted the dust. The town was quiet. The town was too quiet.

On the far side of the plaza, Hatfield spied a stable and corral and left Goldy there under care of a silent white-haired Mexican. Then he turned the corner, making for the sign that read: THE WOUNDED BULL.

The cantina was like a thousand Hatfield had seen during his wanderings, nothing but the sign to distinguish it from any one of the others. The same smoky yellow light spilled out to lie pooled in the street's dust, and the batwing doors had the same rubbed corners and creaked with the same protest as had all the others Hatfield had pushed through.

THE place was empty except for the bartender, and this was a difference Hatfield immediately noted. For a Border cantina in the cool of the evening is normally filled with men reliving the day's triumphs or drinking down its disappointments.

Hatfield spun a coin upon the bar, saying, "Beer, if it's cold."

The bartender, a thin dried-up man with a Taos haircut, said, "Cool, not cold. And it's Mexican."

"That will do," Hatfield said, thumbing his hat back.

The bartender went out in a back room, returning in a few moments with a bottle of beer. Drawing the cork out, he said casually, "Long trip from El Paso, eh?"

Hatfield said, "If I'd come from El Paso, it would have been."

"Ah," said the bartender. He worked the cork loose and beer foamed gently at the bottle top. You didn't come from El Paso then. Glass?"

"No glass, my friend. It tastes best from the bottle. Who cares where one is from or where one goes. One goes and one returns; that is all."

The bartender lowered his voice. "For a moment you had me wondering, Pease. You were cagy. You get any other instructions other than to stop in here?"

"No," Hatfield answered, and was glad it had come off this easily.

"All right then. It's too late for you to ride out to the headquarters. There's a little *posada* down the street. Get a room there. You can get some grub there, too. Nothing but Mex food—frijoles, enchiladas or chili—but it ain't too bad. The man who runs the place is Mexican and won't like you; but he can use the money. Early tomorrow check back here and there will be a guide to take you to the boss."

Hatfield took a long draught of the beer, wiping his mouth with his sleeve afterward. He said, frowning, "This all the entertainment this town offers?"

"All for now. Nobody comes out nights around here now. People here getting pretty spooky. You oughta need the sleep anyway."

"I reckon," Hatfield said glumly. He finished the beer and set the bottle back upon the bar. "Well, adios. I'll see you in the morning."

"So long, Pease. Make it an hour or so after daylight. In case you need anything come to the back of the *cantina* and knock on the door. My name's Art Lufkin."

"I'll do that," Hatfield said and left.

He found the *posada*, a one-story adobe building with a tamped dirt patio, and checked in. Realizing that Luke Pease would not sign his true name, he registered under the name of Tom Jimson while the *posadero* watched. Once in his room he stretched out on the roped bed, stared at the ceiling, and had his quiet chuckle.

"Much longer on this case and I won't know *who* I am!"

More serious thoughts claimed his attention then. There was no doubt that Carlos Vierra had sent a telegram to the effect that Luke Pease was on the way. Hatfield had noticed the little telegraph office after putting Goldy in the stables. And probably they had been notified that Jim Hatfield was coming also. There were still several questions he wanted answers to, and he doubted that there would be time tomorrow. That meant he had to pay a visit tonight. He would go to see Don José, Disputa's *alcade*.

Going across the patio to the *comedor*, he ate a hearty meal of eggs and chili and tortillas, washing it down with two cups of Mexican coffee, boiled in milk and water and sweetened with *polancillo*. Although the *mozo* who waited upon him seemed disinclined to talk, Hatfield's adroit questioning brought out the knowledge that the *alcalde's* home was just north of the center of the village.

He had no trouble finding Don José's place. It was the only *hacienda* of any size in Disputa, seated on a small rise that overlooked the town. It was not a large place, even with its outbuildings, but it had a look of settled comfort. Cottonwood trees partially screened it from the road; the honey-odor of *huisache* filled the air; from the separate kitchen, where Hatfield could dimly make out the *ristras* of chile peppers hanging from the *vigas*, came rhythmic sound of corn being ground upon a *metate*.

Hatfield thought it best not to enter the main entrance of the *hacienda* and run the risk of being seen. He circled the

A TALL TEXAS TALE

THE BLUNDERER

A COWPUNCHER, enjoying a night in town, went into a little sidestreet restaurant and ordered a steak.

When the plate was served, he loosened his belt for a royal feast. But taking knife and fork to the meat, he found it so leathery he couldn't cut a bite from it.

For fifteen minutes he struggled, finally tackling it with his razor-sharp pocketknife. Still no luck. At last, perspiring and breathing heavily, he called the proprietor over and explained his difficulties.

Leaning over for a close look at the steak, the proprietor said, "Well, we can't take it back now, buddy. Look how you've dented it!"

—*Jack Kytle*

area, taking advantage of the cover afforded by the cottonwood trees, until he was stopped by the poles of a *corrida.* Knowing that the outside architecture of most Spanish dwellings was similar, he took a chance and in a few moments found himself on the edge of a tile patio enclosed by the front and two wings of the *hacienda.*

He was just about to ease his way along the wall to a rear door when he heard the soft whispering of voices somewhere on the patio!

HE PULLED back rapidly into the shadows, holding his breath. The whisperers were hidden in the black circumference of the patio, and Hatfield had no way of telling who they were, although he judged by the voices that there were two of them, possibly a man and a woman. That they would be Don José and his wife or daughter was doubtful, for they would have no need to lower their voices in this manner. And even if they were the people he wanted to see, this wasn't the way to confront them. He would have to wait until they left the patio.

He leaned against the wall, not moving, and settled himself for a long wait.

The conversation went on in low tones and whispers, none of it audible to Hatfield until the woman's voice finally rose, saying, "No! This is wrong!" And Hatfield heard the click of her footsteps across the tile. A man's tall shadowed shape stood then and immediately vanished into the cottonwoods, outlined briefly as the woman opened and closed a door.

Hatfield waited while he counted slowly to sixty, then silently went towards the door the woman had just entered, drawing one of his Peacemakers as he tested the latch. He had no intention of using the gun except for the purpose of dissuading his surprised host from using one.

The door opened into a wide hallway curtained at the other end. Light crept around the curtain edges, and Hatfield could hear the murmur of voices. He tiptoed to the curtain, standing to one side where he could see through a narrow rift.

The room into which he looked was evidently the living room, Hatfield judged. It was furnished better than the average with comfortable-looking chairs and couches. Brightly colored Navaho blankets hung upon the walls which were whitened with *yeso.* An adobe fireplace occupied one corner, its leaping flames adding to the light cast by the *candilejas* hanging from the ceiling.

A white-haired man and a girl sat by the fireplace, their backs to Hatfield. These, he knew, must be Don Alverado and his daughter, Dolores.

He stepped into the room, saying quietly, "Please don't move or raise your voices."

The girl gave a quick start, then turned slowly to face him, black eyes flashing defiantly.

The man did not move. He said in slow and precise English, "There is nothing here to steal. If you need food or shelter, you are welcome to what we have."

"I come neither to steal nor for food," Hatfield said. He passed around to their front, standing with his back to the fireplace. He faced a dignified-looking *hacendado* whose white hair and moustache accented eyes as dark as the girl's. Hatfield added then, "Are you Don José Alverado?"

"Yes, senor, I am Don José. And you may put the gun away. As you can see, I am not armed."

"I'll do that," Hatfield said, smiling, "Just as soon as I tell you who I am. I'm Jim Hatfield, the Texas Ranger that Captain McDowell sent to investigate the strange doings around here."

The girl said rapidly in Spanish, "Don't believe him. He looks like the rest of the gunmen who have been coming to Disputa. And I saw him going into The Wounded Bull this evening."

Don José raised an eyebrow. "You were in Disputa? Why? I told you to stay away from there."

Dolores Alverado flushed. "It was just for the ride and to see about a new dress."

There was something odd about this girl, Hatfield thought, something she was

covering up. He was sure that she was the woman who had been carrying on a whispered conversation in the patio, and evidently she had made a forbidden trip to Disputa. Why?

"If you don't mind," the Lone Wolf said, "I'd like to get on with business, Don José. I can't blame your daughter for suspecting me, and I regret I don't have my credentials with me. But I can repeat to you almost word for word the message you sent Captain McDowell." And Hatfield, having as a matter of routine memorized the message, repeated it.

"That much is so," Don José nodded. "But there is more that you could tell if you are who you say you are."

"There is," agreed Hatfield. "And I'm afraid it isn't good news." He went on to tell Don José about Tomas's death and the gunman, Carlos Vierra, who had tried to ambush Hatfield on the road to Disputa. "Tomas asked me to tell you he died doing his best in your service, Don José. I arranged for his burial. It was the least I could do."

"You have convinced me, *Señor* Hatfield," Don José said gravely.

DOLORES ALVERADO jumped to her feet, saying fiercely, "But not me! Perhaps you are the man who killed Tomas. You still have shown us no proof that you are a Texas Ranger."

"Quiet!" Don José said sternly. "I think you had better go to your room."

Hatfield, remembering the girl's mysterious visitor, said, "If you don't mind, Don José, I would like her to stay."

Don José nodded, puzzled lines appearing between his eyes. Dolores sank slowly back into her chair, giving Hatfield a look that seemed to be half entreaty and half anger.

"This is a long story, *Señor* Hatfield." said Don José. "How much it has to do with what is going on in Disputa now, I do not know. Perhaps nothing, perhaps everything. *Quien sabe*? You have some knowledge of this land?"

Hatfield nodded.

"Then you know of the dam and the old river bed. Once not so many years ago, *Señor* Hatfield, the river flowed in the old bed. All of this land around Disputa and the *llano* which now lies between the two river beds belonged to my father who received it as a grant from the Mexican government."

"That was while Texas was still part of Coahuila?"

"*Si.* And even then the river changed course many times. But it made no difference as this land was then all in Mexico. But then came your great victory at San Jacinto and later on the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. And there was much argument about boundaries. At that time it made not much difference to my father and my people. For we were *rancheros,* and as long as we were left alone to till the fields and graze our sheep, it did not matter whether we were in Mexico or Texas. You understand this, *senor*?"

"I understand," Hatfield said gravely. He moved over to a cowhide-backed chair and sat down.

"Then," Don José went on, "during your Civil War the river changed to its present course, making a hugh S with Disputa in one crook and the *llano* in another, just as it is now. The Mexican government sent soldiers to build the dam, so that the river would not flow back to the old bed. Your people were too busy to pay attention or make a protest. And it did not matter to us, as long as we could use the land."

Hatfield leaned forward. "How about the Court of Private Land Claims? Did they approve your grant?"

Don José paused to light a *cigarillo.* "Yes. But they said it was an agricultural grant, which meant we must live on the land and work it for four years. That time will be up next month."

"Then there is nothing to worry about."

"There is much to worry about," Don José said bluntly. "Three years ago the Mexican *revolutionarios* sold the Alverado Grant. It was bought by somebody who calls himself the West Texas Land Company. We were told to take our people off the *llano.* The Mexican soldiers came to see that we obeyed. But we did

not think they could take this part of our land. Then this company said that as we had given up part of the land, that the rest of the grant was forfeited. But your Claims court says that if my people stay there for four years they can keep their farms. If they do not, then instead of throwing the land open to homesteading, this land company will have the land."

"And you figure these gunmen have something to do with all this?"

Don José spread his hands. "*Si, por supesto!* Of course! You have been in Disputa. How many of my people have you seen on the streets? How many of the *jacals* are dark? Already many of the *peones* have gone. They are not a fighting people, *señor*. I have promised to give this land to them. They simply want to live on it in peace."

"Sometimes," Hatfield observed quietly, "you have to fight for peace."

"They have seen much *violencia, señor*. Many are those who were forced off the *llano* by the *soldatos*. They remember, and want no more. Now these men have come."

"There has been no violence yet?"

"No, not yet. At least there have been no guns. But none have been needed so far. Think of yourself as a simple peon, *Señor* Hatfield. And you see these big men with two guns ride into your town or past your small *ranchero*. And maybe you are drinking mescal in a cantina, and you hear these men talk of the days they rode with Quantrill or Jesse James or Billy the Kid. And you remember how you were held and whipped before, and how your wife screamed."

"I can see how your people think," agreed Hatfield. "And talking about gunmen, I wonder if you might recognize the handwriting on this note I took from Luke Pease." He reached into his pocket and brought out the bit of paper.

DON JOSÉ read it slowly, his lips slightly moving. "No, I do not think I have seen this writing before. But it is good writing, eh? Fine and small but yet clear. It is not by some ignorant *ladino*." He shook his head, handing the note back to Hatfield.

Hatfield refolded the note and replaced it in his shirt pocket. "Maybe we'll know before very long."

Dolores Alverado, who had been listening intently and silently, said, "May I go to my room now? It grows late and I am tired." She gave Hatfield a pleading look.

Hatfield nodded, smiling, and said, "*Buenas noches.*"

After Dolores disappeared through the curtain, Hatfield rose and said, "I think I shall go, Don José. I don't know what I can do legally. But if I can prove that this West Texas Land Company is using illegal means to drive you from the land, perhaps I can get Austin to put a stop to it."

"*Gracias.* Thank you," said Don José. "I will see you to the door."

Hatfield shook his head. "I better go the way I came, Don José."

His thoughts were in a turmoil as he reached the patio. Did the gathering of outlaws have anything to do with the land claim? And why would anybody go to the trouble to send to South America and other foreign lands for those gunmen? And what could legally be done about it? The gunmen apparently were staying on the Mexican side, and nobody had been killed. And, last, what was Dolores Alverado's secret and why did she apparently resent Hatfield?

He was closing the door behind him softly when he heard Dolores Alverado's voice come from the shadows.

"*Señor,* I would like to speak with you!"

VI

Outlaws' Den

JIM HATFIELD could hear the soft rustle of her clothing, and when Dolores Alverado was close enough to put her hand on his arm he caught the subtle odor of hyacinth.

He said, his voice pitched to a low dryness, "Thought you didn't care about talk-

ing to outlaws?"

Her voice betrayed her impatience. "Outlaw or Texas Ranger, it makes no difference; I want to speak to you as a man. You were in the patio earlier, yes?"

"Yes," Hatfield answered honestly, knowing now what was going to come.

She moved closer, her hair a wraith-like touch upon his shoulder. "You heard me speaking to somebody. It had nothing to do with your business. You would not tell my father?"

"It hasn't crossed my mind," said the Lone Wolf.

She was not satisfied; she moved against him, her hands resting upon his shoulders. "Don't let it," she said earnestly. "This thing you saw and heard was something personal. You will promise you will not speak of it?"

Her nearness sent Hatfield's thoughts racing disturbingly. Yet in Dolores Alverado's very closeness the Ranger felt her reluctance, as though this was a thing that had to be done for some obscure reason of her own. There was no wantonness here, but instead a deliberate purpose. And even feeling this way, her presence stirred him and made him want to make the promise she asked.

"I hope I will not need to mention it."

Her hands slipped away from him and she stepped back. Surprisingly she seemed satisfied, and her low chuckle floated across the darkness to Hatfield. "Thank you," she murmured, and the sound of her footsteps faded across the patio.

Hatfield made his way to the *posada* in a perplexed mood.

He arose early that next morning, breakfasting hugely on eggs and side meat and stopping off at the stable afterwards to look in on Goldy.

"I'll need him in about an hour," he told the hostler and decided to take this remaining time to look around the town.

Disputa in the morning's growing light showed a pleasant cleanness that surprised Hatfield. Shopkeepers had already swept the plank walks clean. A girl with the dawn's soberness still upon her was quietly drawing water from the well in the plaza. In front of an adobe building across the plaza from The Wounded Bull two men were taking down a sign reading, ALONZO GOMES, *MERCERIA*—DRY-GOODS. A platform spring wagon stood in front of the building, the pair of oxen yoked to it quietly chewing their cuds.

The two men ceased work as Hatfield strolled by this place and gazed stiffly after him, the low tones of their voices not reaching him until he had passed. He knew what Luke Pease would do, and he turned swiftly on his heel, catching them open-mouthed. He laughed shortly and harshly and continued on his way.

"Scared," he murmured. "But not for themselves."

A dun horse stood three-footed in front of The Wounded Bull and nuzzled incuriously at the tie rail. The doors of the cantina were wedged open and an empty beer keg lay outside them. The plank walk had not been swept, and Hatfield knew somehow that it would never be as long as it was run by Art Lufkin. The Wounded Bull was in the town, but not a part of it. Hatfield guessed that it had been taken over recently by the ghost outlaws.

Crossing the littered board walk, he entered the saloon.

Art Lufkin, his eyes red-rimmed, came from behind the bar and said, "These early hours can ruin a man's digestion. You ready to ride?"

"Anytime," Hatfield replied.

"Might as well get saddled up then." Lufkin turned away from Hatfield and called loudly, "Hey, Kid!"

"Coming," a young voice answered him from somewhere in the back room, and in a minute a tall, lank shape showed itself at the rear door.

"Well, I'm damned," Hatfield murmured to himself. For this was no scarred and hardened outlaw that came into the room.

"This here is Luke Pease, Kid," Lufkin said. "He's the one you're taking out to the camp. Soon as he checks in with Saveyard you ride back here. Might want to use you on that stagecoach job."

"I hear you," the Kid said shortly. He

was not much more than a boy, his shape not yet filled out to match his height. His Stetson was pushed back on his head, showing unruly blond hair, and his gunbelt hung loosely upon his hips. He turned his gaze to Hatfield, his eyes showing curiosity but no liking, and said, "Howdy. You get your horse and meet me the other side of the bridge."

"I'll be there," Hatfield said. He added then, remembering his new character as Luke Pease, "When you talk to your betters, Kid, you talk polite and gentle like."

THE LONE WOLF turned and walked out into the street, not pausing to see how this remark was taken. During the short walk back to the livery stable his thoughts were busy. Lufkin had mentioned a job on the stage, and Hatfield wondered what Lufkin had in mind. Pop Waggoner, the driver, was carrying no money box. And Lufkin had also mentioned Saveyard. That, the Ranger reckoned, must be Deke Saveyard, one of the first of the fast-draw men to terrorize Texas. And Saveyard had known Cullen Baker, and might have known Luke Pease!

Too, there was something vaguely familiar about the younker Art Lufkin had called the Kid. Hatfield was sure he hadn't seen him before, but there was still the disturbing thought that he had seen him somewhere recently. He tried to remember whether it was the voice or the gangly shape, and finding no answer soon gave up for the time, storing this thought in a corner of his mind.

The hostler had Goldy saddled and bridled by the time Hatfield got to the stable. Hatfield checked the cinches and bridle briefly before mounting, nodding his approval. The old Mexican, even though he might hate the gringo badmen who were coming to Disputa, had recognized a superb horse and had taken good care of the golden stallion.

Hatfield tossed the man a couple of silver dollars, touched his hatbrim in acknowledgment of the Mexican's "*Gracias*" and rode out into Disputa's morning.

From long habit he had oriented himself almost as soon as he reached the town, and he had no trouble finding the street that would lead him to the bridge road. Goldy was eager for exercise, feeling the excitement of the morning in his great muscles, and Hatfield let him have his head as soon as they passed the town's edge.

In a few minutes he raised the bridge, a narrow wooden structure that looked as though it had been hastily thrown together with no thought of permanence. The Kid was waiting on this side, sitting his saddle careless and relaxed. He gave Hatfield a brief tilt of his head and spurred his dun across the bridge.

Hatfield followed, Goldy's hooves drumming up a low thunder on the planks. Chukking softly to the big sorrel, the Lone Wolf drew alongside the Kid.

"Everybody around here always in this much of a hurry?"

"I do what I'm told," the Kid replied. "You'll do the same when you meet the boss."

"Saveyard?" Hatfield grunted. "Maybe. But from what I heard of him he ain't got the brains to boss an outfit like this."

"He's the ramrod, Pease. Somebody else is the big boss. Saveyard takes care of the gun chores and keeps the rest in line."

Hatfield said, "Seems to me you're pretty young to be with this bunch, Kid. Thought we were all going to be old-timers?"

"I'm old enough to ride and pack a gun," the Kid said stiffly. "And my old man was one of the best. Maybe you've heard of Dallas Grattan."

"Sure," Hatfield said carelessly. "He was with the James boys when they started. Heard tell he lit out for Old Mexico when the Pinkertons got hot on the trail. He here, too?"

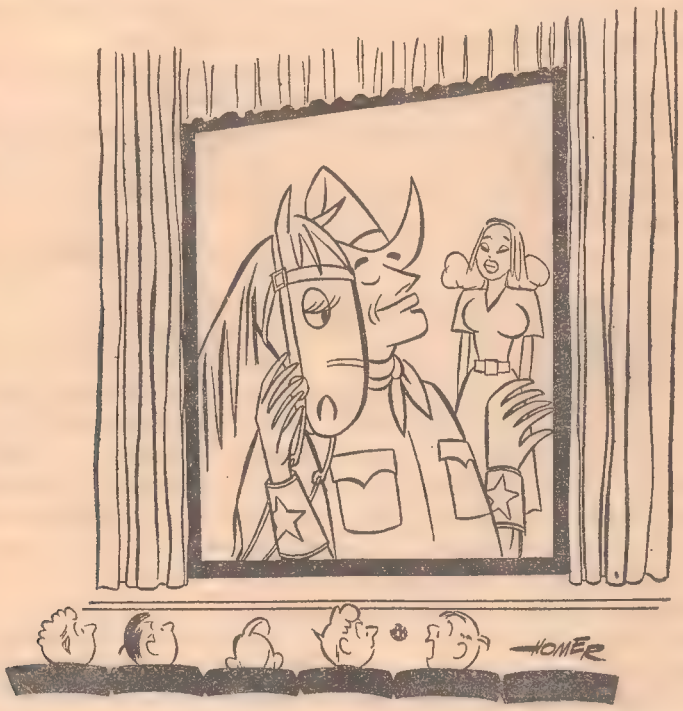
"Would have been," young Grattan said. "He got the word, but he died before he could make the trip. I come in his place. Maybe I ain't no big he-wolf yet, but I'm learning, and someday people will know about Bob Grattan."

"Maybe," muttered Hatfield.

Bob Grattan was right, Hatfield thought. Someday maybe the world would know about the son of the dead outlaw, if he didn't end up in boothill first. The younger Grattan was at the fork of the trail. Another few steps on the path he was now taking and his chance for another kind of life would be gone. The Texas Ranger had seen many youngsters like this one standing at that fork, and he had helped many of them take the right path. He was determined to have a talk with Bob Grattan as soon as he could do so, but shelved the idea for the present as being too risky.

He recognized the Kid's truculence as a pose to hide his youth and inexperience, and he resolved to butter him up enough to get some information. "I heard of your dad," he said. "And so I reckon his cub must be a chip off the old block. I reckon you got the sign read on this little set-up pretty smart."

"Sure have," Bob Grattan answered eagerly. "It's pretty smart, all right. Like you know, all the old owlhooters got the call to come back, and the big boss promised there wouldn't be any trouble with the law. With things the way they are between Mexico and the U. S., neither country wants to send any law in on account of not wanting to get the other's neck bowed. And when the boss takes over legal-like, this will be like a separate country where nobody will bother us."



"I wonder what he sees in his horse? If it was me, I'd take the girl anytime!"

"The boss expect us to settle down and grow alfalfa?" Hatfield growled.

Bob Grattan said warily, "That's what the boss thinks, maybe. But some of the gang have got different ideas. Mind you, I ain't took no sides yet. But I can't see making a long journey like this just to

scare out a few *peones* and then settle down in no rocking chair."

"Sounds logical to me," agreed Hatfield. "This is a perfect base to work both sides of the Border, as long as the U.S. and Mexico don't want to step on each other's toes over it. I reckon Saveyard figures the same way, huh?"

"You'll talk to him," Bob Grattan said. He reined in the dun and pointed to a spot ahead of them. "Yonder is the dam. We have to cross it to get to the hideout. Then there's maybe a couple hours ride."

"You could cut off some time by crossing the dry bed below the dam," Hatfield pointed out.

"Quicksand there," said Grattan. "The river bed ain't settled yet. You try to cross anywheres else, you'll bog down." He urged the dun onward. "Let's get going. Saveyard will be waiting. I reckon you're the last one."

GOLDY kept a surefooted pace along the narrow trail that led up the earthen ramp that leveled off atop the dam. It was a crudely built barrier of dirt, faced with rock to prevent the current from washing it away. Wide enough at the top for two horsemen stirrup-to-stirrup, it flared out at the base to make a solidly made barrier to the river. Hatfield watched the current's steady assault on the river side, the water slanting at the dam's face and then boiling away.

He was surprised upon reaching the *llano.* For some reason he had expected a dry and infertile land, but this ground cupped by the two river beds showed surprising promise. Grama grass grew in thick patches, excellent grazing land for cattle or sheep, and the variety of wild flowers indicated that a farmer could make a good living. Here and there he passed what had evidently been plowed fields, overrun now with jimson weed and bluebonnets.

Farther on he saw smoke spiraling above a clump of cottonwood trees, and in a few moments he saw its source. Half hidden by the cottonwoods, an adobe *hacienda,* weather-yellowed and decrepit now but once evidently the home of a prosperous *haciendado,* squatted in the midst of broken and scattered outbuildings and corrals. Six or seven horses stood hipshot at a picket line stretched from the hacienda to one of the outbuildings.

"This is it," young Grattan said, pulling up his horse. "Hold up here until the guard passes us."

"All right, Bob," Hatfield murmured.

"Kid," said Bob Grattan. "Call me Kid."

"Sure," said Hatfield, repressing a smile. Evidently Bob Grattan had decided his given name didn't sound tough enough for the owlhoot trail.

Somewhere off to their right a man's rough voice called, "You got the word?" And almost immediately a swarthy hombre carrying a shotgun in the crook of his arm stepped from behind a cottonwood.

"One returns," called Bob Grattan. "It's me, Hawk, the Kid. I brung Luke Pease in from town."

"Saveyard's waiting," growled Hawk.

Hatfield said, "The hell with Saveyard. I want to see the big boss."

"You'll see the boss when Saveyard gets through with you, mister. And I don't care if you was Cullen Baker's hole card or not, Pease. You'll take orders like the rest of us."

"For now, my friend," Hatfield murmured.

Approaching the house Bob Grattan said, "That hombre's not a good one to tangle with. He's Hawk Jesperson. Rode with the wild bunch up in the Nations. He and Saveyard are pretty thick."

Hatfield, swinging down from the saddle at the picket line, nodded abstractedly. He knew of Hawk Jesperson, remembering that the gunman had been in the Texas Rangers' black book for years although he was thought to have gone to Canada. He mentally added one more to the roster he kept in his memory. It looked like the tales told about Disputa hadn't been exaggerated, after all.

A man came out of the hacienda's door and stood spraddle-legged at the veranda's edge, silently watching as Hatfield and

Bob Grattan hitched the horses to the line. He shifted his heavy body impatiently as Hatfield deliberately took his time. His high cheekbones seemed to pinch up his eyes to an odd squint, and his sandy hair fell lankly over his ears. He wore two guns, Hatfield noticed, the left gun holstered high for a cross draw.

Bob Grattan said, "Yonder's Saveyard. Better hurry up."

"Something more important first," Hatfield said, letting his voice carry. He walked over to a well he noticed in the yard, drew a bucket of water and brought it over to Goldy. He stood there and watched as the big stallion whickered his thanks and plunged his nose into the bucket.

"All right," Hatfield finally said. "Come on, Kid."

Hatfield had observed no reaction from Saveyard upon hearing the Ranger's voice. Either the man was holding his thoughts, or he did not remember the voice of Luke Pease. The next few moments, Hatfield thought, would tell the tale. He wanted to touch the false scar over his eye, fighting a small battle with himself to keep from making this gesture.

As Hatfield and Bob Grattan neared the veranda's edge, Saveyard's eyes narrowed even more making their close scrutiny of the supposed Luke Pease. Hatfield could see merely the slightest flicker of their pale and washed-out blue, not able to read anything in their slitted gaze.

BOB GRATTAN said, "Saveyard, here's the man you been looking for. Pease, this here is Deke Saveyard. I reckon he'll want to give you the lay-out."

Saveyard did not offer to shake hands. He nodded slightly, giving Hatfield this barest of acknowledgments. "Took you long enough, Pease."

"Had an extra chore to take care of," Hatfield said evenly. "You ought to know that."

"You have any trouble?"

Hatfield shrugged. "He died quick and easy. That spy you sent to El Paso should have told you by now."

"He telegraphed," Saveyard admitted. "Said he'd bring word himself later on. But he ain't showed yet. You run across him on the road?"

"He left before I did," the Ranger said truthfully. "Most likely stopped off to celebrate with some tequilla and some senoritas."

"Maybe," Saveyard grunted. He unhooked one thumb from a gunbelt and made a jerky gesture. "Go on inside, Pease. I want to get a full report. And maybe you can use a drink."

Hatfield thought he detected a small tone of doubt in Saveyard's voice. He hesitated a moment at the door, intending to let the outlaw ramrod enter first.

Saveyard said dryly, "After you, my friend," then called back to Bob Grattan, "Round up the rest of the boys, Kid. I want 'em to meet the new member."

The adobe's front room was a cluttered arrangement of saddles, rolled-up soogans and whisky bottles. A crude table and a couple of hard benches balanced upon uneven legs in the room's center. An unfinished solitaire layout lay in neat piles upon the table. Saveyard dropped heavily to one of the benches, reached across to the cards and placed a red jack carefully upon a black queen, his mind seemingly completely occupied with this small occupation. His brushy eyebrows, sweeping upwards at the outside ends and reminding Hatfield of a sandy Lucifer, met as he concentrated upon the cards.

Hatfield pulled an old tomato crate from one of the corners and upended it to make an uncomfortable seat. He knew that for all Saveyard's apparent interest in the solitaire game the outlaw was really weighing the supposed Luke Pease.

Hatfield said, his tone as dry as dust, "I wear my belt at the fourth notch and my long johns have a hole in the left elbow."

Saveyard looked up, not smiling. He said calmly, "And you wear your guns like you know how to use them, and you've got a V scar over your left eye.

Which tallies. And you gave Art Lufkin the right password. Which is another point in your favor, my friend. But I had in mind that Luke Pease was a mite older than you look to be. Which same puts me in some doubt. I reckon I'll have to ask if you got a piece of paper on you."

Hatfield allowed himself a slight smile. With a feeling of relief, he thought this wasn't going to be as bad as he first figured. He was thankful for the impulse that had led him to keep the note he found on Luke Pease's body.

He drawled, "I've kept myself from growing old by leading a pure life," and reached in his shirt pocket for the note. A cold feeling came over him.

The note wasn't there.

He said, carefully controlling his voice, "Thought sure I had it. Must have mislaid it someplace."

Saveyard said frigidly, "Maybe you never had one, my friend."

"If I didn't," Hatfield replied swiftly, "how could I know it read, *Here is one of ours?*"

"I'll grant your point there," said Saveyard. "But I won't ever be sure, will I?"

Hatfield came swiftly to his feet, the tomato crate clattering to the floor. "Far as that goes, mister, I'm not so damn sure either. How do I know who you are?"

Saveyard dropped his hands close to his guns. "Take it slow, Pease. We've got to be careful. The boss can't afford to make any mistakes and let a lawman wangle his way in here. The boys will be here in a minute, and maybe one of them will know you. If not, then I've got another idea."

THE sounds of bootheels and spur chains played an obligato to Saveyard's words, and as he finished six men filed into the room, taking their places behind Saveyard, Hawk Jesperson in the lead. They were a rough-looking crew, Hatfield thought, giving them his sharp attention. Besides Jesperson he knew none of them personally, although he tabbed a squat bow-legged gunman and a wolfish-faced man with long burnsides as being Matt Juggins and Bass Ives, remembering their faces from wanted posters.

Saveyard said, "Boys, any of you know Luke Pease?"

Their general mutter of "No." Then Bass Ives spoke out, saying, "Wiley Harpe is still out in the cookshack. I heard tell he rode with Cullen Baker a while. He ought to know."

This was the event Hatfield hoped wouldn't happen. He had been lucky, but now it looked as though his string might be played out. But there was nothing to do but brazen it out, taking the chance that a man's dim memory of crowded years might give him doubt.

"He *should* know me. We saw a lot of gunsmoke together."

Saveyard said, pointing to a full-faced man with foxy eyes, "Ringgold, tell Harpe to get up here and meet an old partner."

After Ringgold went out, Matt Juggins said, "Heard tell about Luke Pease having a scar like that. And he always carried two guns, like this hombre."

Saveyard grunted.

Hatfield said, "I'm getting pretty sick and tired of this here kangaroo court. Take me to the boss and let's get this settled."

"The boss is busy," Saveyard answered shortly. "He wouldn't know anyway."

Ringgold came in then, followed by Wiley Harpe, a balding man who limped slightly. Harpe pointed a stubby finger at Hatfield, saying, "This is the man?"

Upon Saveyard's nod, he said, "By his looks, I'd say yes. Same build, and he's got that funny-looking scar. But I wasn't with Baker but a short spell."

Hatfield broke in, reaching back in his memory. "You remember the day we cut Bill Longley down from the tree where the vigilantes strung him up? And how we caught one of 'em later and strung *him* up?"

"Sure," said Harpe. "And I remember Luke Pease and Baker and Longley

matching to see who was quickest on the draw. And Luke Pease always won. Could you still do it?"

Hatfield said dryly, "I don't think Saveyard would take kindly to my drawing on him right now."

"We can find a better use for your guns, Pease," said Saveyard. "About the only way we can judge now is by giving you a test. There's a little job needs doing, and it'll take a fast man on the draw. Take care of the chore and I reckon there won't be no question about you who are."

Hatfield frowned. "Dammit, I travel most three thousand miles on rotten banana boats and Mex mules to get here, and you want to play games. Suppose I don't want to do any chores for you right now?"

"Then there won't be nobody to cut you down," Saveyard said softly.

"You don't leave a man much choice," Hatfield said. "What's the job?"

"There's a joker we want gunned down, mister. He'll be coming in on the stage due in Disputa this afternoon. All you got to do is meet the stage outside Disputa, call him out and kill him. If you're Luke Pease it oughta be easy."

The Lone Wolf thought of Pop Waggoner, wondering what these men could have against the stage driver. He said then, "What's this hombre's name?"

"Hatfield," said Saveyard. "A Texas Ranger named Jim Hatfield!"

VII

The Rope

SAVEYARD'S statement hit Hatfield with almost a physical force, making his blood pound faster and bringing his mind to a greater alertness. This was a dangerous game he had to play now and he had to plan his moves carefully, working on Saveyard's mind to make it twist in the right direction.

It was the missing note that had triggered this new development to its shocking explosion. He remembered Dolores Alverado talking to him on the patio, her hands upon his shirt front, and her soft triumphant laughter floating across the darkness. Don Alverado's daughter had stolen the note from his shirt pocket! But why? Hatfield dismissed this problem from his mind for the moment, realizing he had more important work to be done.

"How about a little help, Saveyard? I've heard of this Hatfield. No use taking chances."

Saveyard's eyes narrowed. "Don't you reckon you can handle him by yourself?"

Bass Ives said, "Hell, he's right. That Hatfield is a ringtailed roarer. Why go looking for trouble?"

"Shut up!" Saveyard growled. "We're putting this hombre to a test. If he's Luke Pease he can handle this Ranger. If he can't do it, then we'll have plenty of time to take care of him ourselves. You'll go alone, my friend."

"If you are too scared to do it, then I guess I'll have to," Hatfield jeered. "Just one thing. When I get back I check in to nobody but the boss. Savvy?"

"All right," said Saveyard, but there was a quality in his voice that made Hatfield wonder. "One more thing. How are we going to know if you gunned down this Hatfield?"

Hatfield had been waiting for this question. "He'll have a badge and papers from Austin, won't he? No Ranger gives them up. When I bring them back with me you'll know."

Bass Ives said, "I don't get it. Suppose this joker ain't Pease like he says? We ought to send somebody with him to check on him."

"Makes no difference," Saveyard said calmly. "If he's who he says he is, he'll gun the Ranger. If he ain't, then he'll keep on riding—if he's smart. Either way we get rid of somebody we don't want around. Mister, you can go back to the cookshack and get some grub. Then you better ride if you want to meet that stage before it gets to Disputa."

"I'll see the boss when I come back," Hatfield warned. "And I'll bust wide open

the man who tries to stop me."

He followed Wiley Harpe to the cookshack. After a tough steak, fried potatoes and coffee he sauntered leisurely to the picket rope and mounted Goldy. He waved a sardonic goodbye to the men gathered on the veranda and put the stallion into an easy lope.

The plan was simple enough. All he had to do was to ride out to where he cached his badge and papers, then wait for the stage. Joel Waggoner, the stage driver, would vouch for his story in town, in case Saveyard or any of the others should think to check with the driver. Then Hatfield would simply ride back to the hacienda and demand to see the boss with his proof. He was glad he had guessed Saveyard's way of thinking; the outlaw ramrod's contrary nature had led him into Hatfield's trap, snapping immediately at the Lone Wolf's bait.

There was no doubt that Deke Saveyard was playing a double game. And it seemed likely that the other returned outlaws were on his side of the corral. Hatfield knew that he would have to tangle with Saveyard sooner or later, in or out of his role of Luke Pease. For Pease was the only one of the outlaws whose reputation matched Saveyard's, and that made him a threat to the gunman's leadership.

And, Hatfield reflected, what about the actual boss of the outlaws, the person who had brought them here? He had heard faint sounds in the next room of the hacienda as though somebody were listening at the door. Was that the boss? And if it were, why didn't the boss come out to meet the new arrival?

Passing over the dam he thought of Dolores Alverado. There was no question in Hatfield's mind that she had stolen the note he intended to use as a passport to the outlaw camp. Here was another riddle that he would have to unravel.

He hit Disputa still engrossed in these thoughts.

THERE were few people on the streets this noon. Those that Hatfield did pass either purposely ignored him or gave him resentful stares. The sign of the *Merceria* was leaning against a tie rail, and the spring wagon in front of the store was loaded with crates and boxes. Several *peones* were walking slowly towards the El Paso road, bundles slung upon their backs. Disputa was dying.

Hatfield tied up at the tie rail before The Wounded Bull. Art Lufkin could give him the information concerning the stage.

The cantina was as empty of life as it had been yesterday when Hatfield first arrived. Lufkin was sitting at a table near the rear, leafing through a newspaper. He looked up as Hatfield entered the cantina's dim interior.

"They put you on that stage job?"

Hatfield pulled up a chair, seating himself across from the outlaw bartender. "Yeah. Saveyard semed to think that should be my chore. I don't understand this deal, Lufkin. I didn't even get to see the boss, and this Saveyard seems to think he's the big auger."

Lufkin leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Take my advice, Pease. Stick with Saveyard. You'll make more money that way in a couple weeks than you could make all year with the boss's plan. Saveyard will give this country some action like they never seen before."

"It better come pretty soon then," Hatfield grumbled. "I didn't ride all this way for nothing. Right now you better give me the time this stage is due. I didn't think it was smart to ask any of the town people."

"Stage is due in about two hours. You meet it on the south road—the one coming in from Van Horn Springs. Best place is past the rise where the road goes through a dry arroyo. And be plumb careful. This Texas Ranger is supposed to be a fast hombre with a gun."

"How about the driver?"

"You won't have no trouble with him. I'd knock him out of the box first thing. But the Ranger is the important target."

"I'll take care of him," Hatfield promised. "But it seems to me like it isn't a good idea. When they hear about it back

in Austin they'll send a whole company of Rangers and wipe this place up."

Lufkin smiled crookedly. "That's where Saveyard is smart. With this boundary dispute on, both sides have an informal deal to keep their lawmen out. Looks like this Hatfield took it upon himself to investigate. And if Austin should send a company of Rangers, Mexico would raise a real howl about it. And them diplomats in striped pants don't want that to happen. So all the Texas Rangers can do about Hatfield's killing is forget it."

"Pretty smart," grunted Hatfield. "I can see now why Saveyard is ramrodding this deal. But how about the boss? Seems to me I heard there wasn't supposed to be any gunplay."

"Hasn't been until now," Lufkin admitted. "But Saveyard figures it's time to show his hand. The boys are getting restless."

"Then the boss didn't have any say about my gunning that Mex in El Paso?"

Lufkin shook his head. "That was Saveyard's own idea. He heard that old Alverado was sending his *segundo* to El Paso to contact somebody. So he sent Carlos Vierra to check on him. Vierra is half-Mex and half-Yaqui. He drifted in to Disputa one day, running from the *Rurales* on account of a murder charge, so Saveyard hired him. But when Saveyard heard you'd hit El Paso he figured it would be best for you to take care of the *segundo*."

"Why couldn't Vierra do it?"

Lufkin lit up a crooked cigar. "Might be Saveyard figured he'd talk if he got caught."

"Likely," agreed Hatfield, and rose. "Reckon I might as well ride on out."

"Luck," Art Lufkin said and again showed his crooked grin.

ONCE on the Van Horn Springs road Hatfield felt a reluctant admiration for Saveyard's skill in planning. The outlaw ramrod was too smart to risk forcing a fight with a Texas Ranger in Disputa itself. Right now the townspeople were pretty well cowed, but a killing in the town might stir some of them to resistance. With a free-for-all gun battle going on in Disputa, either the Rangers or the Rurales would have an excuse to move in without fear of objection from the other side.

Hatfield looked back often after leaving Disputa's outer reaches, wondering if maybe Saveyard had decided after all to send a man to check on him. Once he thought he saw a faint plume of dust back along the trail, but it was too far away to tell if it was a horseman or merely a dust devil.

Ahead of him he could see the rise where he had halted Goldy and cached his badge and papers. There would be a full hour yet before the stage came along. A cottonwood tree threw its welcoming shade over the spot, and the Lone Wolf suddenly realized that he was tired. What sleep he had in the last few nights had been fitful and uneasy.

A SMALL TEXAS TALE

WICKED WORMS

THE CITY kid was the laughing stock of all the hands on the dude ranch. He was regarded as the tenderfoot to end all tenderfeet until he entered the ranch-house one afternoon after a stroll in the nearby hills, carrying three enormous rattlesnake rattles.

The host of the ranch turned white. "Where did you find those things?"

"Wotcha flippin' yer lid for?" asked the city brat. "I didn't steal 'em. Not from no human being, anyway. Just took 'em off a couple of the biggest darned worms I ever seen!"

—Howie Lasseter

He *chukked* softly to Goldy and took the upward slant at a high lope. Pausing a moment, he had his long look along both reaches of the road, then pulled Goldy off the side and into the cooling shade.

"That cottonwood sure looks good, doesn't it, boy?" Hatfield murmured. He loosened the cinches and threw Goldy's reins down over the stallion's head. Then he drew a long breath and lay down under the tree, hat pulled down over his eyes. He knew that the rattle of the stage would awaken him.

The sun had started its downward dip to the world's rim when the low rumble of wheels on uneven ground awakened him. Coming to his feet he saw the mud wagon rounding a bend near the beginning of the grade. He stretched hugely, feeling some better, then tilted up the rock and slipped the oilskin pouch containing badge and papers into his boot.

Mounting Goldy, he rode leisurely back to the road and waited for the mud wagon to breast the rise. Joel Waggoner would be surprised.

The mud wagon braked to a creaking halt opposite him and Waggoner's irritated voice said, "Dammit, all you're doing is wasting time! There ain't a 'dobe peso on the wagon."

"Calm down," Hatfield smiled, raising his head. "I'm not starting to rob stages yet!"

"Jim Hatfield!" Waggoner exploded. "I was just thinking of you. Wondered how you were making out."

"Hard to say," answered Hatfield. He brought Goldy up beside the driver's box and told Waggoner of what had happened. He recalled then the chore he had given the stage driver and asked, "You get those messages sent?"

Waggoner ejected a brown stream of tobacco juice into the road bed. "Sure did. Took 'em to the telegraph office in Van Horn soon as I got there. And say, I almost forgot, I picked one up for you there. Operator said it came in just before I got there. Come down from El Paso and was routed for Disputa, but seems the wires are down there. Told him I'd deliver it to you." Waggoner reached into a pocket and brought out a sealed message envelope.

"Thanks, Pop," Hatfield said, taking the envelope. So the wires to Disputa were down. That meant that the outlaw gang were getting ready to make a move. There had been no high winds strong enough to lay this to accident. He wondered if the message was from Captain Bill McDowell, although he was sure the Ranger Captain wouldn't want to give away Hatfield's position. But he could think of nobody else the message could be from.

As soon as he opened the envelope he saw he was wrong. "From Red McGinty," he said aloud, looking at the signature first. "He must have made some fast tracks back to El Paso to send this."

"Hell," said Waggoner. "Thought he was going to stay at Hueco to guard that *ladino* Vierra."

Hatfield let out a long ragged breath. "He was. He wired to tell me that Vierra escaped early this morning."

Waggoner whistled softly. "That makes the cheese more binding, Ranger. That means Vierra will be on the way here, and as soon as he sees Saveyard your little game will be up. Figuring his condition with that wounded shoulder, I don't reckon he can make it before the middle of the afternoon, even reckoning he stole himself a good horse. That don't leave you much time to work out your plans."

"A couple hours more," Hatfield agreed soberly. "Well, you might as well get along, Joel. You know the story to tell when you hit Disputa?"

"Sure thing," Waggoner chuckled. "This Hatfield joker didn't have a chance against Luke Pease! Good luck, Ranger." He brought the whip flashing out with an explosive snap, shouting, "Giddap, you lop-eared canaries!"

WATCHING the mud wagon's trailing dust plumes, Hatfield slowly tore up the telegram and scattered the pieces in the dust. He would have to work faster now than he thought at first. Whatever the outlaw gang was planning

was due to come tonight, Hatfield guessed. He had thought he would have time to split the gang, challenging Saveyard's leadership. But with Carlos Vierra on the way, whatever he did would have to be done immediately.

He watched the mud wagon bounce its way to the foot of the slope and turn off into the narrow cut that marked the place where the road turned. Then he spoke softly to Goldy and started after it, his mind racing faster than the golden stallion's powerful legs.

The turns and twists of this situation had tangled, the Lone Wolf thought as he turned into the narrow cut, into a knot that offered no end to grasp for its unraveling.

He heard the soft hissing sound and instinctively ducked low over Goldy's neck. He was too late. The rope settled over his shoulders and tightened. He reined Goldy to a sudden halt, hoping to offset the jerk he knew would come, and kicked his boots out of the stirrups. The loop became violently taut at that instant, and Hatfield felt himself leave the saddle. The road rushed up to meet him and he felt something strike his head.

He plummeted into a deep well of darkness and then knew nothing more.

VIII

The Boss

JIM HATFIELD awoke with his head throbbing painfully and this afternoon's blazing sun beating into his eyes. It took him a few minutes to realize where he was and what he was doing there. Then he managed to struggle to his feet, finding himself standing in a clump of mesquite that clung to the cutbank bordering the road. Somehow he located his hat and placed it gingerly upon his head, feeling it was much too small. He took several tentative steps before he discovered he was not wearing his boots.

His thoughts still hazy, he retraced his steps and finally found the boots near the place he'd been lying. It wasn't until he completed the laborious chore of putting them on that he realized what else was wrong.

His Ranger's badge and papers were missing.

Somehow he knew that it would do no good to look for them. They had been the object of the unknown bushwhacker's assault. Evidently the man had followed Hatfield, then waited patiently at the top of the cutbank until he rode back through that place. And this made Hatfield wonder, for it had only been by chance that the stage passed through the cut first. An experienced hand at this game would have chosen another time and place.

Anyway, the Ranger thought wryly, whoever it was had accomplished his purpose. The proof he was going to take back to the outlaw rendezvous was gone, and the plan to convince Saveyard and the others of Hatfield's death wouldn't work.

Having no hope in this next gesture, he put fingers to his mouth and whistled shrilly. There was just the chance that the assailant, instead of taking Goldy with him, had merely driven the big stallion away, not knowing Goldy's training.

The whistle echoed back and forth between the cutbanks, losing itself finally in the sharp breaks. Hatfield waited a few moments, hearing nothing more, then tried it again. In a moment an answering whinny, faint and distant, floated back to him, and on its heels Goldy came pounding around the far bend towards him.

Hatfield stroked the big stallion's flank while Goldy nuzzled joyfully at his arm. "Good boy," he murmured, then swung stiffly up into the saddle.

There was only one thing to do, Hatfield mused, and that was to play the hunch that came to him a while back. This attack had been made by an inexperienced hand, which probably meant that none of the outlaws were involved in it. In that case, he might still be able to bluff his way through. It was worth a try, anyway. The problem of who made the attack still ex-

isted, and Hatfield, bringing Goldy to a high lope, wrestled with this a while before filing it away in a corner of his mind. He would think about it later.

Avoiding Disputa, he cut to the south and hit the bridge before the shadows became much longer. After crossing the dam he found the trail to the hacienda, and in a short time pulled Goldy down to a walk, knowing that he would soon be challenged by the lookout man.

Almost immediately a harsh voice sang out, throwing its rough challenge over the land.

"Hold up, rider!"

The voice belonged to Bass Ives, and Hatfield answered "It's Luke Pease, Bass. I have to give that stupid password again?"

This was a crucial moment, Hatfield knew, and he held himself ready to spring from the saddle at the first warning. If the outlaw gang had arranged for the ambush, Bass Ives would probably have the Texas Ranger in the sights of his Winchester right now.

Hatfield let a small breath escape as Ives stepped from behind a boulder, Winchester cradled in the crook of his arm. Either Ives didn't know, or he was going to let the Ranger ride in to let Saveyard and the rest of the outlaw gang take care of him.

Ives said, waving an arm, "Ride on in, Pease. You got some good news to report?"

"Not to you," Hatfield replied bluntly.

"You are a proud and touchy hombre," Ives said, his voice showing a resentful irritation. "I trust that Saveyard will put you in your place."

"He may try," said Hatfield, urging Goldy past the gunman.

WITH the hacienda dimly in view, Hatfield heard the sharp report of a rifle and knew Ives had signalled that Luke Pease was on his way in. He was not surprised therefore to find Saveyard, Harpe and a couple more of the outlaws waiting on the veranda as he brought Goldy to the picket rope.

Saveyard said heavily, "You either killed yourself a Ranger or you got a lot of nerve. You bring back that law badge?"

Hatfield said levelly, "You'll know when your boss tells you."

Saveyard scowled. "Pease, don't play no games with me. I'm ramrodding this outfit. You got that badge and papers, hand them over, and you and me will get along fine. There ain't no use to bother the boss."

"I told you what to expect when I came back," Hatfield said, giving Deke Saveyard the full toughness of his gaze. "I came here on a deal with the boss, not with you. And I'm getting pretty tired of you acting like the big auger of this lay. Now lead me to the boss real pretty like, sonny boy, or I'll have to unscrew your head."

Saveyard said, flushing angrily, "You talk big. You don't look that big."

Hatfield, noticing Saveyard's reddening face, smiled inwardly. His deliberate baiting of the outlaw ramrod was working the way he had hoped it would. Forcing a fight upon the gunman might be taking a chance, but it was a chance Hatfield must take. It was the only way to override Saveyard's leadership of the other outlaws and give the Ranger a chance to see the real leader.

"For you," Hatfield drawled, "I don't even have to be that big."

Harpe broke in quickly, "Boys, the boss said no gunplay."

"Don't need guns to handle this rooster," Saveyard growled. "Pease, either hand that proof over to me now, or I'll take it off you—providing you got it."

Wiley Harpe said, "Rest of the boys are coming. I claim to be neutral in this, gents. But I reckon you both better shuck your guns if you're going to tangle."

"Suits me," Saveyard grunted. He unbuckled his gunbelt and handed it to Harpe.

The rest of the outlaws, except for Ives who was still on guard, drifted up and eyed Hatfield and Saveyard curiously. Hatfield, looking them over, decided that

neither he nor Saveyard would get any help. Saveyard had evidently assumed leadership on the basis of his reputation and sheer force of personality, and the other members of the outlaw gang would remain a skeptical audience of this test.

Bob Grattan came out of the house then, giving Hatfield an odd look. The Ranger handed him his guns and moved away from the veranda, sensing that he would need plenty of room. His back half-turned to Saveyard, he took only two steps before the big outlaw's fist smashed the back of his neck.

"I shot an arrow into the air, it fell to earth I know not where."

Falling heavily, Hatfield reached back and caught Saveyard's fist. He threw out one leg as he went forward and managed a fast turn, catching Saveyard across his hip and spinning the outlaw to the dirt.

Hatfield could not prevent himself from going down and landed heavily on his knees, his neck already sore and aching from Saveyard's blow. The side of his head where it had struck when he was dragged off Goldy started a steady throbbing. He pushed himself up again, at this same moment seeing Saveyard roll like a cat and come to his feet.

Saveyard shook his head, making a full circle around Hatfield, his face strangely colored and his eyes a scorching turbulence. The anger in him was a vital and moving force that sobered the Ranger, for he knew that he meant to kill him. He followed Saveyard's movements warily, taking this small space of time to feel his balance.

"I am going to tear you apart, my friend," Saveyard said, and moved in.

He came at Hatfield with a pounding rush, his blows sure and sharp. Hatfield caught them on his arms, lifting his shoulder and feeling their sting, and drove back a solid smash that caught Saveyard on the chest. Saveyard broke ground for an instant, then moved in again, his fin-

gers jabbing at Hatfield's eyes. Hatfield brought his arms up and fended off the viciousness of this attack, and at once felt Saveyard's knee slam into his crotch. Pain ran a heated course through him and he closed against the outlaw and brought an arm crashing into Saveyard's throat. He heard Saveyard's harsh out-thrust of wind and he jabbed Saveyard in the belly, getting little force in this blow.

He broke away then, swiping hurriedly at the bridge of his nose where Saveyard's nail had opened a cut. Saveyard pushed after him, taking quick advantage of this gesture. Hatfield caught the outlaw's blow partly on his palm, but the force of it drove him back. He felt somebody's hands at his shoulder blades, and he was propelled rapidly forward towards Saveyard, his legs not wanting to hold him up.

TEMPER plucked hugely at his outraged nerves. Temper shook him, and he ducked his head and drove straight for Saveyard, catching a blow behind his ear as he felt Saveyard give way. He was off balance now. Saveyard chopped two quick blows to his kidneys and stepped aside to give room for the smash that would bring Hatfield down. Hatfield, knowing what was coming, drove a punch stiffly toward Saveyard's face to throw the man off balance. He knew he couldn't entirely stop the blow, and he made no attempt to brace himself, letting his head roll with the impact.

He hit the hard-packed dirt on his side, dazed but not out, and he knew he had to get up from there in a hurry. One leg was doubled up under him, and the weight of the other upon it was like being pinned by a bulldogged steer. He tried to straighten the leg and felt his muscles take hold with a maddening slowness. He heard Bob Grattan call, surprisingly, "Watch the boots, Pease!" and looked up just in time to see Saveyard, grinning wickedly, launch himself in a high-kneed leap.

Somehow he managed to lurch his body violently to one side. His legs straightened and cut the air in a great arcing slash, meeting Saveyard's legs at the boottops. He heard Saveyard's surprised and angry grunt, and he saw the outlaw's bulk bounce against the earth.

The pain of it shot up his shins to his thighs, but the feel of it was welcome, for he knew he had avoided a slam that would have crushed his chest or ruptured his stomach. He came up in a hurry, not wanting to be caught this way again.

Saveyard was up with him, breathing hard and with one side of his face disfigured with blood and dirt. Saveyard threw a furious glance at Bob Grattan, saying coldly, "I'll remember that, Kid," and came at Hatfield with short, quick steps.

This time Hatfield went to meet him, knowing that he had to finish this fast or not at all. He caught Saveyard's chopping blow on his shoulder, then slammed Saveyard in the middle, his head almost lying on the outlaw's shoulder. He caught the rank odor of Saveyard's sweaty body and heard Saveyard pull wind roughly into his lungs.

He kept up a steady pressure, striking Saveyard in the belly and over the diaphragm, driving the wind from his body, not giving the man a chance to draw a clear breath. Saveyard broke away then, making a great backward leap and immediately launching himself into a wild-swinging attack, throwing aside his caution and his cunning.

Hatfield stepped inside Saveyard's wide threshing arms and stunned the outlaw with a coolly vicious punch on the mouth. And as Saveyard dropped back, Hatfield followed and chopped short powerful blows in wicked rhythm to Saveyard's face. Saveyard's eyes showed wide and glazed above his high cheekbones; his guard came down and his legs took the wide stance of a man too spent and bewildered for more fighting.

Hatfield, anger heating his blood, stepped in then. Saveyard was ready for the kill, a wide open target ripe for the finishing punch. Hatfield tore through the outlaw's last feeble defense and planted a solid blow upon Saveyard's jaw and watched Saveyard start his crumpling fall to the ground.

Saveyard hit dirt on hands and knees as if to rise again, but there was no spring in his muscles and he almost instantly fell over on his side, blankness draining over his face and leaving it slack and vacant.

Somebody breathed a ragged, "Aaah!" and this small sound was the only break in the silence until Wiley Harpe said in a carefully neutral tone, "The boss should be in the back room."

"The boss should be right here," said Hatfield, and scooped up his hat. "I'm going in to see why not." He leveled his gaze at each of them in turn, then took his guns from Bob Grattan, saying, "Thanks," and walked straight for the front door. Harpe and Juggins, standing in the way, met his eyes and moved aside silently.

Hatfield turned at the door, saying, "When he comes to, tell him he isn't ramrod any more," and walked into the room's gathering shadows.

He cut straight across the room, shoving a bench out of the way and kicking somebody's warsack to one side. The rear door was slightly ajar, and Hatfield didn't bother to knock. He slammed the door wide with his shoulder and said bluntly, "This the way you treat people you send three thousand miles for?"

In the room's far corner a match scraped alight and flared against the wick of a coal-oil lamp. Darkness fled to the room's edges, and a soft flickering light grew strong and steady.

"No," answered a soft voice.

Hatfield took his long, wondering look at the slim figure outlined against the lamp's glow.

It was Desiree Duveras.

IX

New Ramrod

HATFIELD said in a husky voice, "You? What brought you here?"

"Shut the door, Jim," Desiree Duveras said, and when Hatfield completed that chore added, "You've got the cart before the horse. Nobody brought me. I brought the others here."

The Lone Wolf moved over to a cowhide-backed chair and sat down, giving this woman a new and puzzled scrutiny. Desiree Duveras was wearing a divided riding skirt cut out of some dark green material. A man's shirt, full and bulky, failed to hide the contours of her figure. A desertwillow blossom made a fragile spot of color on one shoulder. Her blond hair was pulled tightly back from her forehead and gathered into a golden mass at the nape of her neck. Her dark eyes regarded Hatfield with a calm amusement.

Hatfield said after a moment, "You're the boss then. Do you know what you're doing?"

Desiree Duveras sat on the edge of a couch, her eyes not leaving Hatfield's. "I thought I did. Now I am not so sure."

"You're playing hell," Hatfield said bluntly. "Are you the one who bought the Alverado Grant from Mexico?"

"My father did. He was a lawyer, Jim—a good one. He made a lot of money. My mother died when I was very young, and Dad always wanted to give me security, but the kind of work he did didn't let him settle in one spot very long. New Orleans, St. Louis, Kansas City, Dodge—"

"I remember," Hatfield broke in. "He made his money defending men like Bill Longley, John Wesley Hardin, the Youngers, and others like that. And now he's used that money to buy this grant. Didn't he know that the title was in doubt?"

"He had friends in the Land Office. He thought he could clear the title, but he died before it was settled. Then I got the idea of forcing off the squatters."

"Squatters? Those people aren't squatters. They've been working this land since the time when Texas was part of Mexico. And now you've brought these outlaws to loot and kill and drive these poor people out. What are you thinking of, Desiree?"

Desiree extended her hands, palms up, in a quick expressive gesture. "No, Jim,

no! I want no killing or looting. And these men aren't what you think they are. They are just men who made a mistake or two and have been hounded ever since. And they've been homesick and want to stay in their own country and settle down to a new life. I'm giving them that chance. Don't you see?"

"You've been listening to too many of your father's court arguments," Hatfield observed dryly. "Do you think men like Saveyard and Ives and Harpe are going to be satisfied to walk behind a plow? Do you know they're planning to raid Disputa tonight? And who killed Tomas Basilio, Don Alverado's *segundo*? And who ordered Carlos Vierra to kill me?"

"I didn't know those things," Desiree said in a small voice. "Carlos was just supposed to keep an eye on Tomas and let us know who he met. I felt that Saveyard had ideas of his own. But you just beat him, didn't you? The others will obey you now."

"Until Vierra arrives and lets them know I'm a Ranger," Hatfield said thinly. "I might have an hour—or I might have five minutes. You know the mission Saveyard sent me on. I was supposed to bring back proof that I did it. But I let myself be gulched, and now it's gone. Without that, your bunch of homesick boys will still doubt me."

Desiree rose, an enigmatic smile on her lips. She opened the lid of a parfleche trunk and brought something out, tossing it to the Ranger.

"Catch, Jim!"

Hatfield stretched an arm and captured the object. It was the oilskin packet holding his badge and commission.

He said in the manner of one summing up a problem, "It was you then. You were listening and knew my voice. You didn't want me to come back here."

"Not me," said Desiree. "I sent Bob Grattan. I didn't know if it would work or not, but Bob was lucky. I just forgot that you weren't the kind of man who would let something like that stop him."

"Thanks," Hatfield said dryly, and came to his feet. His words now came crisp and swift. "I don't know what I can do. I haven't any definite plans. But I've got to prevent the raid Saveyard plans on Disputa. That comes first. You can see that?"

"Yes," Desiree said mildly. "I don't want any violence. I just want the land that belongs to me."

"Ah, now," said Hatfield, shaking his head. "You are still blind. You have sowed a whirlwind and hope to reap a zephyr. When will you understand life is not like that?"

HE WAITED for her answer, trying to understand the obscure motives that pushed this woman. He could see part of it. The moving about from town to town, following her father as he pleaded the cause of outlaws and killers and spoilers. Seeing them through her father's words as romantic hero-figures who were not understood by lesser people. Then her father's death, leaving her alone and unsure. And her quixotic impulse to settle on the Grant, surrounded and protected by these hard men with sixguns, like a queen guarded by her knights.

Desiree came to him, resting her hands upon his shoulders. She said with a softness of tone that was like a caress, "Jim, when you finish talking to Ives and the rest—come back here to me."

The nearness of her was an intoxicating and dangerous invitation. Why not? A man could be king over seven leagues of land with a queen that would be all a man desired. And what would he get by wearing a star the rest of his life? Hatfield felt the outline of his badge through the oilskin, his finger tips rubbing over the circled star that had brought law and justice to so many corners of Texas. And he knew now why he would not stay.

He lifted her hands from his shoulders, watching some feeling he could not define come to brief life in her eyes and then fade. He said gently, "I'm the man who can lick Saveyard—is that it?"

Her gaze lowered. "Yes, Jim. I've been almost like a prisoner. Young Grattan is the only one I could really trust."

"And Vierra?"

"I think he was in love with me. He saw the way I looked at you in El Paso. Now you know why he wanted to kill you."

"He may yet," Hatfield said in a musing voice. "Desiree, give this up."

She stepped back, her head lifting defiantly and stubbornly. "Not even for you, Jim. I know what I want. I'll see it through somehow." She unpinned the desertwillow blossom and tucked it inside his shirt. "So you won't forget me, Jim."

"When I come back we'll be enemies. You know that?"

She made no gesture, she gave no reply. Hatfield stepped outside, quietly closing the door behind him.

Crossing the littered front room, he drove everything from his mind but the immediate task before him. They'd be waiting for him, maybe with guns. But he had his badge and papers now—enough evidence to convince them that he killed the Ranger. Nobody but Bob Grattan would know otherwise, and Grattan, he was sure, would say nothing. With Saveyard temporarily out of the picture, the outlaws would accept the leadership of the man they thought was Luke Pease. From there on his mind was a blank. Except that he knew that somehow, alone and outgunned, he would have to find a way to put an end to the outlaw rule.

He took his quick look as he stepped out the door into the fading daylight. Saveyard was over by the well, dousing his head with water. Harpe and Ives, quietly talking together a few yards from the veranda, casually moved apart as Hatfield's tall form showed in the doorway. Juggins and Jesperson appeared at each end of the veranda. It was an old pattern that Hatfield saw taking shape, and he found himself taking a detached and critical view of it.

"Either Juggins or Jesperson should have stayed back," he murmured. "Always give the sucker what looks like a way out."

Saveyard directed his attention this way now, but made no move, out of the play for the moment. Near the picket line Bob Grattan and two other outlaws loitered.

Ives said flatly, "Well?"

"Told you I had it," Hatfield replied. He tossed the oilskin packet toward Ives, making the movement deliberate and slow.

Ives picked up the packet and opened it, whistling tunelessly to himself. He said finally, "You weren't bluffing, Pease." Then loudly, "You want to see this, Saveyard?"

Saveyard shook his head and grinned thinly. He walked toward Hatfield saying, "Reckon I was wrong about you, Pease. But you can see why I didn't want to take no chance." His tone was confident, it was assured. "You got here just in time. We'll need all the guns we can get when we hit Disputa tonight."

"Huh-uh," said Hatfield. "I just talked to the boss."

"Why, hell, we've all talked to the boss," Saveyard snapped. "So what does that make you?"

"It makes him ramrod," a cool, clear voice sang out from the doorway behind Hatfield. "You'll take his orders from now on." And Desiree Duveras walked to Hatfield's side.

Hatfield said easily, "Any objections?"

IVES came forward saying, "I pass. Take back your scalp, Pease," and handed the oilskin to Hatfield.

Saveyard muttered bleakly, "If you say so, Miss Duveras," but his eyes took on hard points of light.

"We'll stick by Miss Duveras's original plan, then," said Hatfield. He turned to Bob Grattan and called, "Kid, want to take a ride and show me the lay?"

"Sure," said Grattan, and headed for the horses, picking up a saddle and throwing it over his shoulder on the way.

Desiree Duveras spoke in a tone audible only to the Ranger. "I can give you this much, Jim. If you come back, it will be like you said."

Hatfield only nodded soberly. Then he

said, letting his voice carry, "I'll be back in about an hour, just before dark. Ives, you better get a man back on guard. And if you got any poker players here, I'll oblige you after supper. I feel lucky."

Saveyard said, "We can use new blood," and his tone made this remark an admission of defeat.

Bob Grattan was mounted by the time Hatfield got to the picket line and threw a leg over Goldy. He said in a low tone, "I know Saveyard. He won't give up that easy."

Hatfield started to reply but held back when he saw Juggins on the way to saddle up to ride out for guard duty. Juggins grinned briefly, showing a mouthful of gold teeth, and said, "Any man who can get himself a Ranger can give me orders."

"See you later," Hatfield said, and pulled Goldy away, Grattan following.

Some small disturbance of the air nagged at him, and Bob Grattan, hearing it also, pulled his horse up nervously and said, "What's that?" Then the rider broke out of the cottonwoods, quartering toward the house, the dust boiling up around him.

Saveyard's voice, high and sharp, cut through the hoof-thunder: "Dammit! Pull down!"

The rider swerved his horse wickedly, pointing a long arm at Hatfield. "Get this man, *compadres!* He is a Texas Ranger!"

And as the rider spurred his horse towards him, reins held between flashing teeth and sixgun drawn, Hatfield noted that one arm was in a sling.

It was Carlos Vierra!

Gunfire made its wildly-thrown song, ripping the day's last silence, Vierra's shots at this range going wide.

Hatfield said quickly, "Kid, whose play you backing?"

"Yours," Bob Grattan replied promptly.

"Hold those others off, then," Hatfield snapped, and brought Goldy sharply around, Peacemaker now fisted in his free hand.

Vierra was in sixgun range then, a reckless figure, swaying widely in the saddle as he reined his horse in a zig-zag course at Hatfield. He made an obscure and uncertain target, and the Texas Ranger held his fire, watching the *mestizo* break suddenly wide and swerve past him.

He heard Grattan's saddle-gun speak sharply, and Grattan's voice sing out, "Back in the house, dammit! All of you!" A Winchester's long voice could carry authority with sixguns.

He swung Goldy full around to meet Vierra's returning charge, trying to remember how many shots the *mestizo* would have left in his gun. Then there was no time for further thought, Vierra this time plunging toward him at one furious headlong onslaught. He heard Vierra's gun bark and he heard the slug's ugly whine; he heard Vierra shout something that was lost in the hoof-thunder and the shot's uneven echoes. He held Goldy steady and snapped a shot and knew instantly that he had missed. Then Vierra loomed directly in front, an unsure target against the cottonwood's shadows, not checking his horse's onward thrust.

Hatfield brought the Peacemaker's hammer back under his thumb again. He saw Vierra's arm straighten, and he fired, immediately reining Goldy in to a rearing sideways leap to avoid Vierra's stubborn charge. He heard Vierra's high-pitched, "Aaaaah!" and knew that this shot had not missed.

Vierra sat oddly erect in the saddle, his gun arm making witless circles in the air, the horse's reins still clenched in his teeth. Then the reins dropped, and the *mestizo* seemed to come apart all at once. The horse ran out from under him, Vierra sliding limply over the rump. He hit the dirt face down and lay still, and the horse galloped toward the house with stirrups swinging in great slapping arcs.

GRATTAN'S Winchester spat again, and an answering shot came from the hacienda; somebody hadn't left his saddle gun in the boot. Grattan yelled, "This is getting too hot for me."

Hatfield called back, "Throw a couple more at 'em, then follow me!" He holstered the Peacemaker and raced Goldy for the picket line, reaching for the Green

River knife he kept thonged to the saddle. Lead sang by his ears and tugged at his Stetson. He slashed one end of the line free, dodging the plunging horses, and raced for the far end, shouting to Grattan, "Light a shuck, Kid!"

He heard Grattan's answering yell as he made the last slash and saw the horses stampede toward the cottonwoods.

Grattan pulled up alongside as he burst through to the trail. "Where to?"

"The dam," Hatfield answered. "You all right?"

"All right," Grattan nodded. "Why the dam?"

Hatfield lifted his voice over the creak of saddle leather and the pounding of hooves. "They won't wait now to strike at Disputa. They'll have those horses rounded up in a few minutes. One of us can hold 'em off there. The other will have to ride for help."

They reined up at the dam's near approach, letting the horses blow. Hatfield said, "Listen careful now. Head for Don Alverado's place. You know it?"

"I know it in the dark."

"Ah," Hatfield drawled. "Now I understand something. All right. Tell Alverado to mount and arm every man he can find and get here in a hurry. In a damn good hurry."

Grattan shook his head. "Aside from the Don's couple saddle horses, there ain't nothing but a few mules left in the whole town."

"Then do this," Hatfield said after a moment's thought, and he gave Grattan a few terse instructions. "Now ride!" He followed Bob Grattan across the dam's narrow roadway and down the far ramp's sloping passage.

Grattan called, "So long!" and put spurs to his horse.

Hatfield left Goldy in a cottonwood grove that filled a depression to one side of the trail. He took his saddle gun from the boot, filled his pockets with extra cartridges from the saddle bags, and made his way back to the top of the dam. Here he could command the entire length. He wondered for how long.

He thought he heard some sound, and he put his ear to the ground. But he could hear only the rolling of the river; it was yet too early for Saveyard and his outlaw legion. He knew he would need more cover, and he went back to the cottonwoods and found two logs of deadfall and dragged them back up the ramp.

He checked the Winchester magazine and wished momentarily that he had brought the rifle instead of the carbine; those three extra shots could be important. He reloaded his Peacemakers, putting six cartridges into the cylinders instead of the usual five. Then he settled himself behind the deadfalls and waited. He knew it wouldn't be long now.

HE COULD hold them off for a while, for the trail across the dam top was hardly wide enough for two riders. Sooner or later, however they'd break through his fire. The question revolved around how soon young Grattan could get back with the others—and how many would come back with him. And he wondered about Desiree Duveras.

She was smart enough, Hatfield figured, to convince Saveyard and the others that she had been as much taken in by the Range's disguise as they. Carlos Vierra would do no talking, and the outlaw legion knew nothing about the badge episode. And Saveyard wouldn't dare harm her, for even men like Ives and Harpe, killers although they might be, drew the line at women.

His mind turned to Bob Grattan. It was pretty obvious now that Grattan had been the man in the patio with Dolores Alverado. Evidently the influence of this girl combined with the events of these last few days were what had prompted the youngster to choose Hatfield's side. And the Lone Wolf made a mental note that if he got out of this he would try to see that Grattan would get off easy.

His thoughts were broken by the rolling thunder of horses echoing over the low rumble of the river, and in a few moments a lone rider, hand upraised, appeared at the dam's far end.

Hatfield, recognizing him, hunkered behind the deadfall and sighted along the Winchester. "That's far enough, Saveyard!"

"I want to talk with you, Ranger," Saveyard called back.

"Talk from there."

"All right," Saveyard growled. "We've agreed on a deal. You can stop here a while, but sooner or later we'll ride over you. You know that, Ranger."

"All of you won't ride over me," Hatfield said grimly.

"Maybe not," Saveyard agreed. "But why not settle this peaceable-like? No point in you dying for a Mexican *rico* and a few *peones*. We'll give you a chance to clear out with a whole hide. And we'll let the Duveras woman go with you."

Hatfield frowned. There was an arrogant quality in Saveyard's voice that made him wonder. "What do you mean?"

"Vierra didn't die right away. He had time to talk a little. I reckon you know what that means."

X

"Make your try!"

ALL right," Hatfield said, his heart sinking. "I'll listen to you. Where is Desiree?"

Saveyard turned in the saddle and made a sharp movement of his head. Two riders trotted up behind him. Hatfield could see that one was Harpe and the other was Desiree Duveras. She was bareheaded and her hands were evidently tied to the saddle horn. But her head was held up defiantly and she sat straight in the saddle.

Saveyard said, "You take off, Ranger, and when we see you top that rise back of you we'll let her go."

Desiree called, "Jim, don't do it! They intend to kill you anyway."

Saveyard said harshly, "Shut up! How about it, Hatfield?"

The Lone Wolf hitched himself to a more comfortable position behind the deadfall barrier, making this move slow and deliberate, knowing he could use all the time he could get. Saveyard must know that Grattan had gone for help, but he apparently felt he held all the aces in this hand.

"I'll make another deal with you," Hatfield countered. "Put your guns down and ride across with your hands in the air, and I'll see that you get a fair trial."

Saveyard's laughter was sardonic. "If you're figuring on the Kid coming back with much help, Ranger, forget it. There ain't enough horseflesh left in town to feed a ladies' sewing circle. Nothing but a few mules, and it would take them all night to get here."

"Then we'll wait all night," Hatfield replied grimly.

"You're forgetting something, Ranger. We've got the woman. When we come across, she'll be out in front!"

Hatfield said with deliberate coolness, "You'll still leave some dead behind. Let me think it over a while, Saveyard."

"All right," Saveyard agreed, and there was a rising note of triumph in his voice. "We ain't in any big hurry. The sun is almost down." He pointed toward a lone cottonwood tree. "When the sun touches that tree we'll call for your answer. And be sure you make the right answer."

The outlaw turned his horse and made his way back down the ramp, followed by Harpe and Desiree.

Hatfield watched them, alert for any trickery, until their shapes disappeared behind the slope of the ramp. He looked over his shoulder, squinting his eyes at the sun. He had, he figured, about a quarter of an hour. It wasn't enough, but even that little amount of time was a help. He hoped that young Grattan would have no trouble following out his instructions.

He had no great fear of Saveyard using Desiree Duveras as a shield, despite the outlaw's threat. It was evident that Saveyard intended to take over the Alverado Grant for himself, using it as a base of operations for a newly-formed Wild Bunch, and protecting himself by legal

ownership. He would probably have no use for the American side, where Disputa stood, reckoning that he would have trouble with Texas law there. But the *llano* in the cup of the two river beds would make a perfect hideout for a gang of *ladinos,* and the revolutionary Mexican government wouldn't pay too much attention to them provided they confined their outlawry to the Texas side of the Border.

But in order to gain legal title for Desiree Duveras, they would first have to drive the inhabitants of Disputa out. Then Saveyard could force Desiree to give up the Mexican portion to him. The Texas Rangers would have their hands full for years if Saveyard's scheme worked, and the Border would be marked with blood and death.

Hatfield turned just in time to see the sun touch the tip of the cottonwood. From the dam's far end came the dull sound of hoofbeats, and in a moment Saveyard appeared.

"Made up your mind, Hatfield?"

"Yes," the Lone Wolf called clearly. "I'm staying here, Saveyard. Make your try!"

"You asked for it," Saveyard said angrily, and spurred his horse back down the ramp.

Hatfield guessed that the outlaw was busy giving last-minute instructions to the other members of the gang. They wouldn't waste much time now. He steadied the rifle on the deadfall, glad that there was still light enough for accurate shooting.

THE first shot came from a wide unexpected angle, spurting dust over his boots. And immediately following, another buzzed like a hornet over his head. They were going to try to soften him up first, Hatfield realized, and had spread out on the opposite bank in an attempt to outflank his cover. The dam protected his left, but they could make things hot from the other direction. He drew his feet in, thinking of Achilles's heel, and tried to find a target.

Shots *thunked* into the cottonwood logs, sending up thick splinters. Hatfield noted the quick flame of a rifle flash by a mesquite clump and sent a shot that way. He heard a man's angry yell and knew he'd made a hit. The outlaws' fire increased to a steady roll, echo breaking upon echo. Hatfield found no time to make steady aim, this wicked hail of lead forcing him to keep his head down except at rare intervals. He knew that he couldn't last much longer.

Then a shot came from a high angle, burying itself in the dirt by his elbow. One of the outlaws was firing from a tree, with Hatfield's back a plain target!

Hatfield levered a shell into the chamber and fired, taking a hasty aim. He saw leaves fall, but another shot roared from the tree and he knew he had missed. He swung his body around until it was parallel with the logs, making a smaller target for the sniper. This was better cover, but it was too awkward a position for effective use of his rifle.

The firing stopped then, and Saveyard's voice came from somewhere in front. "Hatfield, throw out your guns!"

"Come and take them," Hatfield called back.

"You're a damn fool," said Saveyard. "We're riding over you, then. We're riding over you, and the girl will be in the lead!"

Hatfield didn't answer. Somewhere he thought he heard a distant rumble, and he shook his head savagely, feeling his mind was playing tricks. It was a sound like those he had heard many times on the battlefields of Virginia—artillery caissons hurrying to the front!

Then a voice, loud and clear above the river's murmur, called from somewhere behind him, "Jim, just keep your head down!"

It was the voice of Joel Waggoner.

A volley of rifle fire sounded immediately after Waggoner's welcome command, rippling and spreading along the bank of the dry riverbed. Somebody over yonder screamed in a quick-dying falsetto, and Hatfield heard Saveyard's vicious cursing.

Hatfield heard footsteps behind him, and Bob Grattan flung himself down beside

the Texas Ranger.

"Hatfield, you all right?"

"Sure," grinned the Lone Wolf. He levered the Winchester and shot at a running figure on the opposite bank. He saw the man throw his arms up over his head and collapse; it was Wiley Harpe, and Hatfield mentally retallied the odds. "How many you bring, Grattan?"

"Ten or twelve," Grattan said, and dodged a splinter. "Did just what you told me to do. Got Don Alverado to round up some good men, then rounded up all the mules we could find. There was only four worth taking. Hitched 'em up to the mud wagon, and we all piled on and let Waggoner take over from there. I reckon we all feel safer here being shot at than we did on that wagon."

The outlaws' fire was slackening now, petering out to an uncertain and sporadic snarl. Hatfield, wondering what this meant, said, "You changed your mind about hitting the owlhoot trail?"

"Changed long ago," replied Grattan. "Soon as I met Dolores, and then found out what Saveyard was planning. He was aiming to use dynamite on the town. I know I talked big when I first met you, but I thought you was Luke Pease then."

HATFIELD nodded, then turned to have a look. The men of Disputa formed a ragged line behind him, firing and shifting and firing again. The smell of gunpowder hovered rank in the air, and over the sharp crack of the rifles Hatfield could hear the heavy roar of Joel Waggoner's Big Fifty. Somehow they must put an end to this soon; dusk was descending rapidly over the land and it would be pitch dark inside of an hour.

"Hold the fort," Hatfield told Grattan, and went down the ramp's slope.

At the top of the rise he met Joel Waggoner and Don Alverado bellied down within a ring of spent shells.

Waggoner said happily, "Never had a passenger give me so much trouble!"

"You're a sight for sore eyes," Hatfield replied. "You must have flown most of the way."

Don Alverado said soberly, "*Señor* Hatfield, this man he can talk to mules like no other. The words I would not repeat, though."

Hatfield said, "What have you been able to make out from here?"

"Three of 'em down that I know of," Waggoner said.

"Plus one I got sure," added Hatfield. "And maybe another. They can't have too many left now. If we don't finish it before dark they'll be able to swim the river and get away. What do you think?"

"I'd say let's go over and clean 'em up," Waggoner said promptly.

Don Alverado frowned. "We would still have to cross over the dam, *Señor* Hatfield. And it might be this Saveyard he has set a trap, no? I have seen one hombre crawling near the base of the dam. He was making some trick, I think, but he ran away before I could shoot him."

"Don't think we'll have to worry about it now," said Hatfield. "Sounds like Saveyard and his gang have quit firing. And looks like somebody's waving a white flag."

"Damn if it ain't," grunted Waggoner, squinting through the smoky dusk. "Looks like we got 'em licked."

"Stay here and cover me, just in case," said Hatfield. "I'm going down to see what Saveyard's got on his mind."

"I will call my *peones* together," said Don Alverado.

Hatfield made his way back to the deadfall barricade where Bob Grattan was holding his rifle on the man with the flag.

"Saveyard," muttered Grattan. "He wants to talk."

"What's on your mind, Saveyard?" Hatfield called out.

"You got us licked, Ranger," Saveyard said brittlely. "Most of the boys are dead or hurt bad. Promise there won't be no lynching, and we'll give up."

"You've got your promise. Throw your guns down and come over one at a time, hands in the air."

"Boys are too bad shot up. We'll need some help."

"Desiree?"

"She's hurt pretty bad. Ricochet got her. Been asking for you."

So that was how Desiree's dream was to end, mused Hatfield. "Not with a bang, but with a bullet," he murmured.

"What?" Grattan said in a puzzled tone.

"The way her world ends, Kid." The Lone Wolf raised his voice. "All right, Saveyard. You drop your guns and come over alone. We'll pick up the others when you're dehorned."

"Sure," said Saveyard, his tone carrying no emotion. He lifted his rifle far overhead and threw it into the river. He unbuckled his gunbelt slowly, his eyes not leaving Hatfield's, and let it drop around his feet. Then he walked towards the Texas Ranger with deliberate strides.

Stepping over the deadfall barricade, Saveyard said coolly, "You'll need plenty of men and some blankets for stretchers."

"Hold him at the foot of the ramp," Hatfield said to Grattan. "And tell Don Alverado to bring up his men. And keep your gun on him."

"Don't worry," Grattan said. "I'd welcome the chance to shoot him. Get going, Saveyard."

Don Alverado, seven or eight *peones* trotting behind him, came up shortly after Grattan and his prisoner disappeared into the fringe of cottonwoods.

"I brought blankets and spades, *Señor* Hatfield."

"Good," Hatfield said. "Let's go over and collect the rest of these hombres. Keep a sharp watch, though. I won't trust Saveyard until he's dead."

"*Si,*" Don Alverado agreed soberly. "*Andale, hombres!* Let's go!"

They started over the hard-packed top of the dam, Hatfield leading. The sun was dropping rapidly behind the darkened hills, flooding the river with its waning crimson. There was no sound but the murmured complaint of the river as it kept its steady pressure against the dam, trying to press its way back to its old channel.

They were a quarter of the way across when the shot cracked wickedly. And immediately a rider appeared before them, a small, slight figure in the saddle and ash-blond hair streaming in a breath-taking flow of gold.

Hatfield snapped, "Hold it!" as a nervous *peone* brought his rifle up.

The rider was Desiree Duveras, and even as the Lone Wolf's arm smashed against the *peone's* rifle another shot rang out, sending the girl's horse into a frantic plunging.

"Jim—get back! It's a trap! They've set dynamite!"

Hatfield turned to relay Desiree's warning but Don Alverado and the *peones* were already making fast time back to the river bank. Don Alverado calling, "*Señor* Hatfield, do not wait!"

Bass Ives appeared beside Desiree's horse, grasping the bridle of the panicked animal.

Hatfield called, "Desiree, I'm going to drop him. Get back in a hurry."

"Don't wait!" Desiree cried, and used the free ends of the reins to lash at Ives.

Ives visibly winced under the sting of the blows, but hung on doggedly to the rearing horse. He made a poor target in the dying sunlight, and Hatfield wished he had brought his Winchester.

THE Texas Ranger set his teeth grimly. He'd have time for only one shot, and that shot had to count. He kneeled, steadying himself on one knee, and rested the Peacemaker across his left arm. The light was bad and the range was long for a hand gun, and Hatfield felt the sweat prickle his forehead as he waited until Ives's thick body came into line with the sights. He squeezed the trigger then and felt the recoil run up his arm. He saw Ives lurch and drop, letting go of the horse's bridle.

Hatfield called, "Ride back!" and sprinted for the ramp, giving a quick look back as he started down the slope, his heart like ice with what he saw.

For Desiree instead of riding back to the *llano* side was sprinting straight across the dam!

He stopped, frozen in that place, unable to take his eyes from her.

Don Alverado called sharply, *"Señor!* Hurry!"

In some dim corner of his vision he saw Ives's bulk change shape, a shadow upon a darker shadow; and he saw the glint of metal. The shot came as Desiree reached the dam's middle, her horse screaming and rearing in pain and fright. She flew off his back in a long arc, her hair streaming like a pale meteor, and the horse plunged straight for Hatfield.

Hatfield threw himself to one side, letting the frightened animal go by. He called, "I'm coming!" and started back up the slope and he heard Saveyard's mocking laughter follow him.

Then somebody's shoulder hit him hard at the knees, and he hit the dirt and the world came apart. The world tore apart in a roar and a cloud and a tide, uprooting the land around him, setting up an earthquake within him. He pressed himself face down against this trembling surface, felt earth and rock rain all around him. And when he realized it had ceased he stood shakily, looking at the wall of water that plunged past him.

The river was flowing once more in its old channel.

Bob Grattan, slowly rising to his feet beside Hatfield, said in a low voice, "It wasn't that way."

Hatfield stared at him. "What?"

"Desiree. Her world ended with a bang after all."

Hatfield only nodded blankly, too filled with one thought, one emotion, one wonder, to speak. Then he realized suddenly that it was Bob Grattan beside him.

'Saveyard! Where's Saveyard?"

Grattan said frankly, "Jim, I forgot him when I tackled you."

Hatfield strode to the river bank, seeing Don Alverado coming toward him. "Everybody all right, Don José?

"*Si.* A few bumps and bruises, maybe so."

"Has anybody seen Saveyard?"

Don Alverado shook his head. "When the earth flies apart in your face, *señor,* you see nothing. But a peon says somebody snatched his gun."

"I'll get my horse and make a search," Hatfield said dully. "He couldn't have got very far."

And then the realization came to him. Where else would Saveyard go—but straight for the best horse. Hatfield knew he was right in this surmise, something older than time and thought telling him this. He was not surprised when he heard Goldy's angry nicker.

He broke into a run for the hollow where he had left the big stallion.

He crashed through the brush just in time to see the outlaw picking himself up from the ground, Goldy eying him tensely, legs stiff and ears flattened.

Saveyard ripped out, "You damn wringtail!" And then he saw Hatfield, and his eyes narrowed and his hand snaked for the gun stuck in his waistband.

Hatfield drew in one smooth, easy motion, a cold anger putting its icy fingers upon him. The muzzle of the Peacemaker blossomed and the roar of that one shot filled the world.

Saveyard went to his knees as though praying, his hand wrapped around the gun butt and not finding strength to free it. He looked at Hatfield and said "I wish—" and fell on his side, and nobody would ever know what he wished.

And Hatfield went to Goldy and said gently, "Come on, boy," and led him away.

Don Alverado met him with wide, knowing eyes and said, "You have done much for us, *Señor* Hatfield."

"You'll have your land now," said Hatfield.

"Not my land," said Alverado, shaking his head. "I made a promise I will keep. The land will belong to these *peones* who have worked on it for so long."

"And you and your daughter?"

"We will keep some. Enough to live on. And this young man, he will call upon my daughter now by the front door."

Bob Grattan, coming up in time to hear these words, said, "Waggoner says they'll put a stage station in Disputa now, and he'll see I get the job."

Don Alverado said, "There is nothing

(Concluded on page 113)

Something whistled in out of the dark; Valders uttered a garbled cry and fell

HAUNTED DUST

By JOHN CORTEZ

• • •

At first there were five of them,

all hunting buried gold—

and then suddenly the killing began

THE canyon was desolate and lonely. Yet it held trees and grass and, most important of all in those arid mountains, water. This issued from a secret fount in the unscalable heights above and flowed across the higher land, which Ames told them was sacred to the Apaches and must not be trespassed upon, and dropped from this in a low waterfall to course along in a gravel bed and then peter out among the sands.

"Well?" Warburton asked impatiently. "Is this it or isn't it?"

Old Ames was looking all about, brow furrowed in an effort to remember. He

took off his hat and scratched his head. The sun glistened in his white hair.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm all mixed up right now. The zig-zag trail in I remember and the waterfall and I know Chief Nana told us not to go above the falls. But the cabin we built—I don't see any sign of it at all."

"You told us the Apaches burned it," Lindsey said. All that day he had been ill at ease and troubled with misgiving. The conviction had been growing in him ever since they had left Fort Bland two weeks before that he shouldn't have come along. He should have stayed in Fort Bland, tended to his store and been with Polly. She needed him. But the lure of sudden wealth had been too strong and so here he was, in the company of men he had grown to detest. "That was twenty years ago. You can't expect anything to be left."

"We built the fireplace out of stone," Ames said. "That's what I'm looking for. We've got to find that. We hid the dust in a large olla under the hearthstone. A hundred thousand dollars worth. We've got to find the fireplace."

Warburton stared with displeasure and vexation at Valders and Foley who were already panning gravel in the stream. They were excited, like children, and their babble drifted over to Warburton, irritating him, for he had expected to find wealth quickly and not have to work for it.

"I don't see any sign of a fireplace," Warburton said. His tone was ugly, reflecting the resentment and anger that had been building up in him the past several days. "You sure this is the right canyon, Ames?"

Old Ames nodded and made a sound of bewilderment. "The Apaches must have torn it down," he said, "and scattered the stones and the drifting sand covered the rest. We'll have to dig."

"Dig?" Warburton uttered the word as though it were unclean. "Do you have any idea where to dig?"

"The hearthstone can't be too deep under the sand," old Ames said. "It's all easy digging. Maybe we'll find it right away."

"You didn't tell us there would be any digging," Warburton growled. "You said the fireplace would be standing and all we'd have to do is take out the hearthstone and the dust would be there." A thought struck him and his face darkened. "If the Apaches wrecked the fireplace what makes you think they didn't find the gold and scatter that, too?"

Ames' eyes misted. Disappointment and apprehension looked out from their depths. "I never though of that," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I never dreamt of anything like that."

"There's a lot you didn't think about," Warburton said. "I've just about had my fill of you. For several days now you've been sure and then not sure you were on the right track. First you remember, then you don't. I'll make you remember," he said, advancing on Ames with clenched fists. "I'll make you remember good."

Ames threw up his arms in a futile gesture of defense. He could not hope to match Warburton's strength and hulk. Ames realized this and glanced anxiously about, seeking a way to flee.

"That's enough, Warburton," Lindsey said.

The big man came to an abrupt halt. He turned slowly, one heel grinding deep into the sand. The crests of his cheeks were high in wrathful color.

"Oh?" he said. "Since when are you giving orders, Lindsey?"

Lindsey was full of disgust and remorse. *I shouldn't have come,* he thought, *I should have stayed with you, Polly. But I thought it would be different and we'd have money and I could buy you and the baby all the things I want to buy. I'm such a fool, Polly.*

Aloud he said, "I'm not trying to boss any one around. I'm just telling you to leave Ames alone."

"He's been giving us the run-around. I don't even think there is any gold. This is just a scheme of his to get some free grub and feel important for a while. Well, the picnic is over. I want something to show for what I sank into this outfit or I take my share out of his hide."

"Give him a chance," Lindsey said. "You knew before we started out that there are times when he's mixed up. We were going to make allowances for that. It's been all of twenty years and then everybody said he never was too good at following landmarks, but he took us here. The canyon is all that he said it would be."

"Except for the fireplace—and the dust," Waterburton said.

"If it's here we'll find it."

"What makes you think there was any gold here to begin with? I've had my fill of his lies. We've spent hard-earned money staking ourselves and we've come a long way. It isn't a matter of buying an old-timer a few drinks to hear him yarn about the lost Ames Diggings. I put good money into this. I've worked and sweated, and for what? He'll pay me back, right out of his hide."

The time of talking was done, Lindsey realized. Words and argument availed nothing any more. The only things that carried weight now were force and violence. All their tempers were short and they were all armed and there was a good chance that one or more of them would die.

He thought of Polly, but it was not enough to deter him. He put himself between Warburton and Ames and saw Warburton pull up sharply and in a heated instant transfer his wrath and hatred from Ames to himself.

It was then that the cry came from the creek. "Gold!" Valders' voice was hoarse and thick with strident excitation.

"Gold!" Foley echoed.

And all at once the rage and brutal purpose died in Warburton. He turned and ran for the creek . . . .

THE old Apache spread his blanket close to the river and beside this, his last bed, arranged his bow and arrows and a beaded belt and the scalps he had taken in his lifetime. He moved slowly, for the shadow of death was on him, and there was no need to hurry for death would catch him whether he ran or walked or just lay and waited.

When everything had been placed like he wanted, he stood and for a long while stared up at the yellow sky, praying to Stenatliha, the virgin goddess who had brought forth two sons, the god of fire and the god of water. When he was through, he lay down on the blanket and started the wait for death.

The water in the river murmured to him and the wind in the grass and trees whispered to him, of age-old, forgotten secrets, of comfort, and of that peace which he and his kind sought so strangely and perversely in violence and cruelty. They lived only to die and anything that might transpire in the interval between birth and death was transient and whether it be pain or discomfort or anguish it could not endure forever and so should be borne with contempt and indifference. The only permament, lasting thing was death.

He was glad he had not surrendered with Geronimo. If he had he would now be dying a prisoner on some reservation instead of here in the holy place where the water sparkled and the grass and trees were green and the desert gods came to rest and commune. He closed his eyes and remembered.

As a child he had been alert and swift and the Mexicans took to calling him Ciervo, which is Spanish for Deer. Most of the tribe knew Spanish and that became his name. He had been still a boy when his grandfather had taken him to this sacred canyon through the secret trail, not the sharply winding trail, and showed him the water and grass and the game that abounded. They had feasted and rested and then his grandfather had told him that this was the abode of the desert gods and it was here that the old people came, if they could, when it was their time to die.

He had come to the canyon again when he was a warrior, with Chief Nana. White men had come to the canyon, down the winding trail, and they dug in the stream below the falls for the yellow dust that fascinated them so. Nana had not bothered them at first. He had warned them, however, to stay below the falls and never

trespass on the sacred ground above. But the white men's horses strayed and the man who went after them paused to take some yellow stones out of the sacred river. The next day Nana attacked, destroying everything the white men had built, and killing them all but two who escaped. Scalps were taken and then there was dancing and feasting for the sacrilege to the gods had been avenged.

He who was called Ciervo remembered also the many campaigns against the white settlers and their soldiers. He had fought them under Mangas Coloradas and Cochise and Victorio and last of all under Geronimo. He had fought them bitterly, relentlessly and on the day that Geronimo decided to surrender Ciervo had stolen away. He would die but he would never surrender.

So he was happy over what he had done for now he was here dying where it was proper for his kind to die, in the home of the desert gods, in their bosom, in their tender embrace.

THE fire flickered and cast weird shadows over Warburton's face, making him look almost satanic at times. Anger bulged the muscles at the base of his jaw as he glared at Valders and Foley.

"A sluice?" Warburton growled. "Do you realize it will take time to build? And much more time to wash the gravel? What are we going to do for supplies?"

Foley stirred uncomfortably under the big man's wrath. "A couple of us could go to Miguelito for grub and tools."

"It's four days to Miguelito and four days back," Warburton snarled. "Do you think I'm going to spend the rest of my life here?" He turned furiously on Ames who shrank in the face of Warburton's rage. "It's all your fault. You said there would be no digging. You said a hundred thousand dollars worth of dust would be waiting for us under the hearthstone. Where is your damn hearthstone? Where is the dust?"

Ames spread his hands in a gesture that he hoped would explain, but Warburton did not see it. So Ames tried orally.

"It's here. I know it is. It's just drifted over with sand but we'll find it. I know we will. We'll just have to keep on digging."

"I wouldn't mind digging if you knew where to dig," Warburton growled. "But what was it like all day? Dig here and then there and then elsewhere. We must have dug in twenty places and in each one found nothing. Do you expect us to dig up the whole canyon?"

He was all aquiver with rage. His fists clenched and unclenched, his eyes shone with the unreasoning glitter of madness. Old Ames saw this and quailed. When he spoke there was the terror of desperation in his voice as though he had already glimpsed the implacable inevitableness.

"It's been so long," he said. "I don't remember so good any more but the dust is here and we'll find it, if only you'll be patient another two or three days."

"I've been patient long enough," Warburton shouted, brandishing a fist at Ames. "Maybe we will find the dust but you won't be around to know it."

It took them all by surprise except, perhaps, Ames. He had known disappointment and frustration all his life and could not have been expected to anticipate anything else now in the twilight of his life when dreams and hopes could no longer be born. He uttered a single cry, a forlorn whimper of resignation, and waited for the bullet.

Though it smashed him back and left him limp and twisted on the ground yet it was kind and merciful for the death it brought was instant. The echoes of the shot went rolling up the canyon like vile, malicious laughter that chilled the watching men and left them stunned and frozen.

Smoke curled out of the bore of Warburton's pistol. His burning eyes dared every one of them to challenge what he had done but the only answers he got were fear and horror.

THE old Apache was dreaming dreams of a glorious and vigorous youth, of hunts, of battles, of taking scalps, of the contemptuous derision with which he and

his kind listened to the screams of those tied to the torture stakes, when the shot woke him. He was instantly alert and lying there, listening to the echoes rolling up the canyon, growing fainter and dying but not before they had profaned the silence.

Anger stirred in him. The white men must have returned. After many sleeps, as numerous as the leaves of a forest, they had returned. Nothing deterred them when they hunted the yellow dust and yellow stones. When they hunted these nothing was sacred to them.

That he had not yet died carried a great significance for he who was called Ciervo. The gods had not permitted it. They had a task for him first. He would not be welcomed to their abode until it was done.

He put the lethargy of sleep and weariness and age from him and rose from the blanket he had thought never to leave. There was strength in him yet and agility, though not as much as in his younger days, but the gods whispered to him and urged him on and abetted him.

He picked up the bow and arrows. He regretted now that he had not taken his rifle with him but he had not thought there would be need for it and he had left it behind for the living to use in killing white men. But still he had the bow and arrows. His eyes had dimmed but he could yet see well.

The river murmured and the wind whispered and something passed by overhead on softly fluttering wings and far off in the night something cried in faint forlorness but none of these sounds were as soft and silent as Ciervo's footsteps in the sand. . . .

In horror and brutality Lindsey had found kinship with Valders. The two of them sat together and on the far side of the fire watched the craven Foley fawning over Warburton who sat silent and brooding. They had dragged Ames out of the firelight and covered him with a blanket. He could not be seen but his presence was there, rearing monstrous and frightful above the flickering flames.

"In the morning, I'm leaving," Valders said. He spoke quietly so that the other two might not hear. "I never thought it was going to be like this or I never would have come. But it sounded so good. A hundred thousand dollars in gold dust. Twenty thousand apiece. I talked it over with Ada and she agreed it was worth the gamble. We could pay what we owe on the ranch and send the kids to school. We could—" He broke off and passed hand across his eyes as though seeking to brush some loathesome vision away. "I'm leaving."

"I'll come with you," Lindsey said, and smiled sadly, bitterly at Valders. "I was ready to call it quits even before we reached the canyon. Your kids are eight and ten. Mine isn't even born yet. I never should have left Polly, not now. But I thought the gold— We'll leave together in the morning."

Valders was silent a while, watching Warburton. "Maybe we better leave tonight," Valders finally said. "Look at him. Look how he's staring at us."

"Let him stare," Lindsey said, but felt anger and hate rise in him.

"You know it was murder," Valders said with chilling quietness, "and we were witnesses. He can't let us talk."

With the dawning of this realization panic cried a moment in Lindsey. Then it passed, leaving him sick and shaken but also determined. He thought of Polly once, then put her and everything but this one matter from his mind.

"There's three of us to his one. We should be able to handle him."

"Three?" Valders said. "Foley's on his side. He'll never back us. That makes us even."

Fury and desperation were clashing in Lindsey. "Why wait then? Why let them start it? Why not take them now?"

Valders was silent, thinking it over.

"Do you want to wait and let them get us when we're asleep?" Lindsey asked.

Valders looked squarely at Lindsey. Valders' face was suddenly drawn. The need for violence and cruelty which he detested left its mark in the tightening of the planes of his cheeks and in the

twitching of an eyebrow.

"All right," Valders said, and rose to his feet.

Warburton must have sensed it because he could not have heard them. He had been watching all the while and as Valders stood up Warburton said something to Foley that brought the man's attention around sharply and poised him with a hand on his pistol.

Lindsey's throat caught apprehension. He had thought to take them by surprise but that had failed. Now his and Valders' intent was known and there was no turning back and reconsidering. It was plunge ahead and hope not to die. So thinking, he started upward.

Something whistled in out of the dark. Valders uttered a garbled cry and fell back against Lindsey, driving him down on the ground, and in the one glance Lindsey threw up he saw the shaft of the arrow sticking out of Valder's throat.

Another lethal whistle came but passed harmlessly overhead and died in the vast silence of the night. Lindsey saw Valders toppling and he scrambled hastily to get out of the way and kept on scrambling, out past the edge of the firelight, and lay there heavily, listening to the hammering of his heart against the sand.

THE old Apache saw them dart and flee into the night before he could get his third arrow away. They had guns and against these he had no chance except through trickery and stealth. So he moved away from where he had shot the arrow, soundlessly, a shadow among shadows.

He made a wide circle halfway around the fire and paused in the lee of a rock, listening. His ears were still keen. They picked up the nervous snorting of horses not too far away and he was tempted to stampede them but that would give his position away. So he waited, watching, listening, hearing the scurrying of a pack rat nearby and in the distance the melancholy querying of an owl.

Once his will gave way and he sagged in the face of an onrush of a great blackness but he caught himself somehow and climbed back to consciousness. He was all atremble for a while but then he steadied and his eyes cleared and he could see and hear well again.

The fire waned. It had all but died when the faint sound came, telling him that someone was close at hand. He turned silently in that direction, fitting an arrow to the string. The sound came again and he spied it, a shadow moving on the face of the earth. It would have passed him by without noticing him but his time was short and death would not wait. He had already been reprieved once. And this was the proper way to die, among his enemies, killing them and offering their deaths to the gods whose abode he would so soon enter.

The arrow hissed, softly, barely audibly, as it sped on its way. Its target screamed, hoarsely, strickenly, and came upright, still screaming, with both hands tugging at the shaft that would not budge. The second arrow stilled the cries and then there was silence and something greater and more awesome and more frightening than the silence.

He who was called Ciervo sensed it, the gathering of a great hush, the soundless summoning of immeasurable, unfathomable force deep in the bowels of the earth. And then it moved, in inanimate fury, rising upward, and the ground trembled and rocked and dust rose spuming and choking and the roaring of its rage seemed to fill the universe and then all at once it was gone and the canyon stilled and the dust settled and all that remained was the terror of memory. . . .

Fright died slowly in Lindsey. First there had been the arrows out of the night and Valders dying impaled in the throat and, eons afterward, the awful screaming, whether Warburton or Foley he did not know, and after that the earthquake. All he could do was lie there motionlessly, waiting for morning, praying that he would see the dawn before a searching arrow found him in the darkness.

When dawn finally came he moved, stiff and sore from his long vigil. He moved

cautiously, keeping to cover as much as he could, for he had more enemies than the source of the arrows. There was also Warburton or Foley, whichever one was still alive.

He hated to leave Valders and Ames unburried and easy prey for scavengers but self-preservation cried much more urgently in Lindsey. He had a wife and a child yet unborn and thought of these drove him almost frantic. He had already begun to whimper when he took himself in hand and with the coming of light the unnerving fears of the night abated and he could rationalize again.

He intented getting a horse and riding out of the canyon forthwith but when he came to where the horses had been grazing he found them gone, stampeded by the terror and fury of the earthquake. He could have tracked them down for Ames had said that the far end of the canyon was boxed but Warburton or Foley was still about and, even worse, the one who had shot the arrows.

He filled his canteen and took off on foot, making for the zig-zag trail down which they had come into the canyon. When he got there he sat down on a rock and put his face in his hands and all but wept. The quake had torn huge shards from the high ramparts and dumped them into the trail, sealing it.

Now that he was face to face with death he found that he had no fear. It was something that always came and which men, deluding themselves, thought to put off by saying surely it could not come before tomorrow and the next tomorrow and the next. A man, however, always runs out of tomorrows but death never does.

I wouldn't mind, Lindsey thought as he took his face out of his hands and stared up the canyon bright now in the morning sun, *if only I had provided for Polly and the child. They have the store, but that's not a living. If it was I wouldn't have come here seeking Ames's lost dust. Oh, Polly, Polly, forgive me for being such a hopeless fool.*

He had no idea how long he sat there, staring into bleakness and despair. There was no will in him to move or even stir. There was nothing to move for. All that remained was to wait for death and the quicker that came the better it would be.

When the sound came, however, he was instantly alert and moving, into the cover of some boulders, for the noise had been the ring of a shod hoof on stone. He waited breathlessly, pistol clutched in a sweating hand, ears straining. The sound repeated itself, nearer now, and shortly after he heard a horse cough and leather squeal in the vast stillness of the canyon. And when he thought he could no longer endure the suspense the rider came into view.

It was Warburton.

He reined in, face contorted in helpless rage and bafflement as he stared up at the blocked trail. He raised a fist and brandished it in silent fury at the heights, then wheeled his mount just as Lindsey stepped out from concealment.

Warburton wasted not an instant. He drew and fired but Lindsey's gun had already spoken and Warburton folded over sharply in the saddle and then, as if the horn pressing into his stomach pained too much, he rolled away from it and dropped to the ground. . . .

The old Apache fell. For a long while he lay, fighting waves of blackness, for he did not want to die until he was back on the sacred ground and on his last bed beside the river. He prayed, in scattered intervals of consciousness, and the desert gods must have heard for at length some strength returned. He was able to gain his feet once more and went on a reeling, crooked way up the canyon.

He told the desert gods he was sorry he had been unable to kill all the white intruders. He asked for a taste of his youth, just a touch of it, so that he might kill them all but the gods would not grant him this. They gave him only strength enough to return to his bed.

So he arranged his bow and the remaining arrows beside the blanket. He lay down slowly, quietly, and closed his eyes and soon sleep came and dreams.

The wind was soft and gentle as though

atoning for the violence and death of the night before. It caressed broken shards of stone and filled in tiny crevices. It told its ancient secrets to he who was called Ciervo but he was sleeping deeply and did not hear.

LINDSEY rode the horse that Warburton had caught and saddled and even caution was a secondary thing in Lindsey now. One way or another he would die, either from an arrow or years of lonely imprisonment, for the canyon walls were unscalable and the only exit was hopelessly blocked.

Still the instinct of self-preservation kept him looking about, for the shooter of the arrows as well as a way out. There was no doubt in Lindsey that the Indian was alone. If not, they would have attacked in force with the coming of daylight. He saw no riders, no searchers, no trackers. Only he was alive and the Indian, unless he had somehow been killed by Warburton.

Lindsey rode beyond the falls, to see what he could find on the higher ground, and there he came across the crooked, weaving tracks in the sand. They had been made by moccasins and the crazy pattern suggested that their maker had been wounded but Lindsey could spot no blood. He followed them, cautiously now, every sense alert.

When he spied the Apache lying on his blanket, Lindsey dismounted and proceeded on foot. He came in slowly, warily, pistol cocked in his hand, ready to shoot the instant the Indian stirred. The Apache, however, did not move and Lindsey was sure the savage was dead until he was close enough to see the small heaving and lowering of the Apache's chest and hear his labored breaths.

Lindsey took in the bow and arrows and the beaded belt and the scalps all so carefully and neatly arranged and understood what these signified. Then he remembered Valders with the arrow sticking out of his throat and poor Foley, too, screaming alone and terrified and hopeless in the dark, and even though the Apache would not be long in dying, Lindsey raised the pistol and aimed it at the Indian's heart.

His mind willed it but his finger would not squeeze the trigger. Not asleep, something cried in him, not while he's asleep. His hand began to shake and he knew that even if he could pull the trigger now he would miss.

He lowered the weapon and bowed his head and closed his eyes tightly and when he finally opened them and looked he found the Indian sitting upright. He held out a hand to Lindsey and spoke, in an alien tongue Lindsey did not understand. Lindsey would have fired then but the Apache made no move toward his weapons and something else held Lindsey back, something he could not understand except that it was awesome and even reverential.

He was face to face with the fashioning of death. . . .

The old Apache roused and heard them calling him in clear, ringing voices. They were there, all those he had known in the old days before they had left him. They called to him, welcoming him to their company, but when he held out a hand and answered they turned and started away.

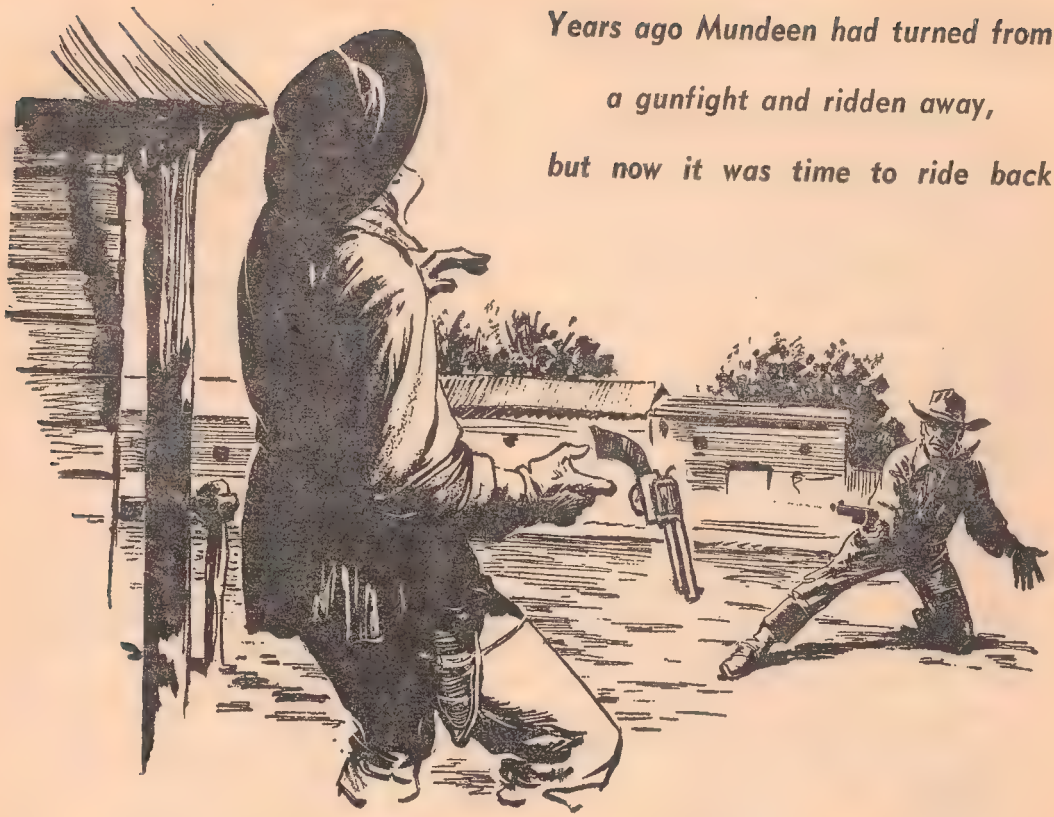
He called again but they would not heed him. They were going and going fast and with a sudden summoning of strength he gained his feet and went hurrying after them. He called anew but they would not turn and answer.

All they showed him were their receding backs and so with all his will and might he pursued them and the faster they ran the faster he pursued and soon he was overtaking them and in the portal that he knew led to his last abode he caught up with them. They gathered him in their arms then and in the smother of their embrace he found at last that for which he had been searching. . . .

Lindsey watched, awed and shaken, as the old Apache made his reeling way up the canyon. Some trees swallowed him and Lindsey, compelled by something he could not define, mounted the horse and followed. It was the last he saw of the Apache alive and if it had not been for

(Concluded on page 113)

Years ago Mundeen had turned from a gunfight and ridden away, but now it was time to ride back



Trail To Yesterday

THE tension in the town of Sawtelle streaked through Will Mundeen even as he rode into the mouth of the wide street. He had said a few hours ago that not even a team of wild horses could have pulled him into Sawtelle on this particular day. For over twenty-four hours he had been telling himself that what was soon to take place here was none of his business, and would only bring misery to an old wound that had never fully crusted over.

He got off his mouse-colored horse in front of Ordway's saddle shop, and stood staring at two men hunkered down on the walk, Ben Fay and Stu Coleman from the Ladder outfit. Fay nodded, then snapped the butt of his cigarette away. He looked up the street, toward McSordia's Hotel & Saloon, then back at Mundeen.

"A nice day for it, Will," he said sourly.

Mundeen stepped up to the walk, reaching for his sack of Durham. He found his hand unsteady when he tried to make a smoke, and crumpled the thin piece of paper into a ball and threw it away.

"The damn young fool!" he said, and felt the weight of his forty odd years. "No-

By JOE *ARCHIBALD*

body's expecting him to prove anything. No matter how it goes he can't bring Jim back."

Coleman said, "Why look for a reason, Will? Long, long ago it was a slingshot. Then it was swords, and for a good many years it's been guns. A man threatens to kill another one who doesn't aim to get killed. The quickest one wins. It is that simple, my friend."

Will sucked in his breath and waited, like all the other people in the town. In about a half hour it was scheduled to take place. Roy Pace was already in McSorda's. Pace was a Bradded T puncher, faster than most men with a gun—almost a professional. Young Al Harnady, who worked for the Ladder, had not come in yet.

A little more than a week ago, during roundup, Jim Harnady had accused Pace of running off a bunch of Ladder calves and hiding them out in a brush corral in the potholes. Pace had answered with a sixgun and they had brought Jim Harnady into town for burial. Not a dozen feet from the edge of a grave, Al Harnady told Roy Pace he was going to kill him, if he had not left the basin inside of ten days.

Pace had said, "I'll be in Sawtelle on the afternoon of the twenty-sixth. One of us leaves. It won't be me."

Will Mundeen said, "Al didn't know what he was saying, Ben. Pace shouldn't have held him to it."

"You remember Amos Harnady, Will? He was a hellion with a gun. He had more fierce pride than any man I ever knew. He handed it down to Al."

"Too bad it wasn't more gun savvy," Stu Coleman said dismally, and watched the road that dropped down off the ridge at the southern perimeter of the town.

"I wonder," Ben Fay said hopefully, "If Al will show up."

"Two silver dollars says he will," Coleman said, and looked toward the saloon again. "There's Pace!" he said.

Mundeen stared, fascinatedly at the small man who had come out to the porch of McSorda's. Pace had his thumbs hooked into his gunbelt, his black flat-crowned hat tipped back over his mop of rusty hair. The man watched the ridge for a few moments, then stepped back into the saloon.

Will Mundeen walked the planks to the mercantile, and when he retraced his steps he said under his breath, "If a man could get a second chance!"

Ben Fay heard him, and wondered.

They waited. All of Sawtelle waited, and the pressure kept building. And then, when the shadows began shortening, Al Harnady came down off the ridge and rode into Sawtelle. Roy Pace stood in front of McSorda's watching him ride by. He called out, "You took your time, Al. It makes me mad to be kept waiting."

Al Harnady reached the tie-rail just across the street from the saddler's, pulled in on the reins and looked back at Roy Pace. He looked up at the sky and seemed to be breathing the cool air in deep. He stayed in the saddle and built a smoke, and the tension running along the street was a nagging material thing. The seconds seemed long minutes. Young Harnady finally flicked the stub of his cigarette away, and swung his bay horse away from the rail. He rode past Roy Pace and out of Sawtelle.

Ben Fay said, "Hell, he crawled!"

Will swung fiercely toward him. "Dammit, Ben, that took all the guts in the whole world. What right have you to judge? Who are you to say whether—" He turned away from the man and looked at the rider. He did not see Al Harnady. He saw Will Mundeen, and it was twenty years ago. He did not hear Roy Pace's mocking laughter, nor the sound of the boots of Ben Fay and Stu Coleman as they walked away. The years fell away from him . . .

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HE HAD met Rufe Duchain in a cattle town near the Ute reservation, when he had about come to the end of the chuck line. They had drank together, two irresponsible saddle tramps, and had been about to ride on together when a man had offered them jobs. He was the foreman of a big cattle ranch owned by a man named *Abel March, the brand the Double Six,*

Will had said to the foreman, Ty Eversall, "You see that old dog across the street? I'll put a bullet in the rainbarrel near it. If it runs up the street, not down, we'll go to work for the Double Six." There had been some humor in him in those days.

The dog had kiyied, and streaked up the street, and he had gone to the ranch with Duchain. After two weeks of honest work they had gone back into the town of Bitter Root to let off steam, and there they had met Anne Traynor. Will Mundeen had fallen in love with her from the moment he saw her, and lost no time in pressing his suit.

Anne worked in her father's dry goods store that was righ next to the King High Saloon in Bitter Root, and she had made it plain to Will Mundeen that she held no thrift for the average puncher who drank too much and had an eye for every dance hall girl that cavorted on the stage in the saloon.

He had about come to the point where he was going to ask the big question when he learned that Anne was more than a little interested in Rufe Duchain, too. Duchain was the handsome, raffish type that generally turned the heads of most women, good or bad.

One night Anne told Will, "Please, I'm not sure. Give me a little more time."

A few weeks later it had become apparent that Duchain had as much chance with Anne as he did. And then one night he happened to come out of the King High after just one drink and met Sally Dawn, one of the percentage girls, who immediately hooked her arms through his and laughingly tried to get him to come back into the saloon again. He had cut loose from her as gently as he could and had gone on his way.

But Rufe Duchain had seen all this and it had led to the bad trouble. Rufe had exaggerated the incident when he told Anne. The next night Will Mundeen was told that he was no longer welcome in the presence of any of the Traynors.

"I'm glad I found out about you, Will, just what kind of a man you are. Please don't bother me again," Anne had said.

He had tried and then Rufe Duchain braced him one night in the Double Six yard in front of a dozen men, and had told him to get out of the valley within forty-eight hours.

"If you have the guts, Mundeen, we'll settle this in Bitter Root tomorrow night. Two of us can't stay here."

"I'll be there," Will had said.

Now, these many years later, Will Mundeen looked toward the ridge where the dust of young Harnady's horse was being whipped away by the wind. That night he had gone into Bitter Root, packing his gun, and on the way he had done much considering. Killing Duchain would have solved nothing. Even if Anne would take him afterward, Duchain's dead face would forever be between them. He felt as if he had lost anyway so would it make sense if he got himself killed?

In front of a lot of the townspeople and riders from half a dozen cattle spreads, he had reined his horse around the same as Harnady had done a few minutes ago, and left the valley.

Sawtelle lost its tension and came alive. Will Mundeen went to the tie-rail and leaned against it, and built a cigarette. Memory, and many imponderables bore down upon him, and the little lines at the corner of his eyes seemed to spread out. And age had not tempered the great hunger he had taken out of Bittler Root with him.

Every morning lately, it seemed, it took him longer to get the stiffness out of his bones, and he felt saddle weariness long before each day was through. Hell, he thought, there should be a graveyard in some remote part of the land where punchers could go to die, and leave sixguns and spurs behind instead of ivory tusks.

After his third cigarette, Will Mundeen had made up his mind. He swept the immediate vicinity of this town with his eyes for it was in his mind that he would never ride this way again.

Ben Fay came cruising along the walk and he yelled, "Come on, you old coot. Let's howl a little!"

Old coot! Will said, "No, thanks, Ben. Take care of yourself," and lifted himself to his saddle. Riding past familiar landmarks on the way back to the Rocking H, Will kept swallowing the lumps that came up in his throat. He had almost become a part of this rough country, but the trouble was and always had been that he had left a bigger part of himself back in the Ute Reservation country.

It would all be forgotten now, he was certain. Rufe Duchain would have married Anne and they should have some likely looking kids by now. He pictured himself walking in on them, and later laughing with them over that crazy business of wanting to shoot each other up. Anne wouldn't have changed much. Maybe some gray in her hair. No matter what, she would always look beautiful to him.

He did not turn his horse loose at the corral when he reached the Rocking H, but tied it to one of the long rails.

A puncher asked, "When will they bury Al, Will? How fast was he?"

"Nothing happened," Will said, and walked up to the ranchhouse and rapped on the door.

Charley DeMoss roared, "Come on in!" When the rancher saw Will, he got up out of his chair and grinned wide. "About time. I left that checker game like it was. I never moved a single man."

Will Mundeen shook his head when DeMoss invited him to sit down. "I'm asking for my time, Charley," he said abruptly. "I'm packing my warbag tonight. I've made up my mind so don't bust a blood vessel arguing the point."

"Why, Will? Why?"

"One reason is I'm too old to keep up with your salty young squirts, Charley. The big reason is none of your blasted business."

The rancher sighed, then looked long and hard at the aging puncher. "I never pried, you know that, Will," he said. "Even though I could see something in the back of your eyes ever since you came to me. Will, I'll tell you one thing even though it's not my business. Don't ever go back."

"I'm a contrary man, you know that," Will said. "Look in your Bible, Charley, and you'll see a lot of contradicting proverbs."

The rancher cursed, and sadly shook his head. "All right, Will. We'll have a last couple of drinks together. And always remember one thing. The bunkhouse out there is your home as long as it stands."

"Stop getting sloppy, Charley, and get my money. And the bottle of whisky," Will said. He turned his head away and quickly shut and opened his eyes. "Don't you ever figure on getting that smoky fireplace fixed?"

AN HOUR later Will Mundeen rode out of the big yard and prodded his mouse-colored bronc toward a stand of timber that was only a long blur against the lesser darkness of the sky.

He left the remains of four campfires behind him before he came out to the high rimrock looking out over the town of Bitter Root. The place had grown; a spur track ran into it from the main line, and there was a long warehouse and a maze of cattle-pens on its southwest side where there used to be nothing but boulder and weed-choked flats.

Far off to his right, however, there were cattle grazing on the sloping meadows near the foot of Baldface Mountain, and they belonged, he knew, to old Abel March. The old man, if he was alive, would be close to eighty now. Will drank in the old vista, his blood quickening in their channels. He told himself that Rufe Duchain might be foreman of the Double Six now, for Abel March always made it a practice to help a puncher up the ladder once he married the right woman.

First, though, Will figured he had better go to Bitter Root and ask some questions. He dropped down to the stage road and followed it into the town, and the first thing he looked for was Traynor's store. It was no longer there, the space had been taken over by the King High. Two other saloons had sprung up since he had left, and at least a dozen new frame buildings.

He tied his horse in front of the saloon and stepped inside, and found nearly a dozen men bellied against the long bar. He recognized none of them, but he caught a glimpse of a familiar face in the big mirror, and turned and walked toward a table where a man sat alone.

"Arch Gannon!" Will said, and the man looked up. Gannon used to ride rough string for Abel March. Now he was over fifty years old.

Gannon finally said, "It can't be!" and stuck out his hand. "Will Mundeen! What brings you back to this place?"

"The only roots I ever planted was here, Arch. Even though I had to pull them up again." He had a drink, deliberately delaying the questions that were on his tongue, and Gannon seemed to know it.

The puncher said, "I'd rather you got it from somebody else, Will."

"Arch, what do you mean? Chew that finer."

"Anne Traynor married Rufe," Arch said. "Abel March died five years later, and willed a piece of land and five hundred head of cattle to Rufe. He built it up to about ten thousand head and kept growing. The Curry Comb." He picked up his glass and finished the whisky left in it, and went off on another tangent. "What do you aim to do back here, Will? At your age? Where have you been since you run out? Make out I didn't say that."

"Since I ran out like a whipped dog, Arch? That was the truth of it, wasn't it?"

Arch Gannon kicked his chair back. "Sure!" he said almost angrily. "Dammit, if you hadn't, maybe things would have been different."

He walked away from the table and out of the King High, and a deep unease seized Will Mundeen, and all at once it occurred to him that the picture he had limned in his mind all the way from Sawtelle could prove to be a masterpiese of wishful thinking.

The tempo in the King High began to step up, and Will was about to pay his tariff and leave when he saw two men coming down the stairs from the second-floor balcony. At first he recognized neither of them, and then when the tallest of the two spoke, he felt a quick shock.

Duchain had changed greatly. The angular face Will Mundeen had remembered was now heavy with added flesh, and there were the beginnings of sacs under his eyes. There was a noticeable bulge just over his gunbelt. The man wore a suit of black broadcloth, the pants tucked into his fancy, tooled boots. Duchain's hair was worn long and was heavily dusted with white.

"Let's have a drink before the stage comes, Rufe," the other man said when they reached the foot of the stairs, and Will yanked his battered hat down over his eyes and stared at the table, wishing a man had never been given the power to remember more than a few weeks back.

Duchain said, his voice harsh, "Sure, friend, and you'll pay for it. You just took most of my money!"

Will Mundeen covertly stole glances at the bar. Duchain gulped his whisky down, and said, "My bag, John," and the barkeep reached down and came up with a big valise and placed it on the bar. Horses hoofs suddenly drummed against the street outside, and a man's yell and the crack of a whip sliced through the racket. Duchain swept the valise off the bar and hurried out of the King High.

"Stage is a little late," the barkeep said.

Will looked out and saw the Concord coach sway to a stop and lift a cloud of dust. A few minutes later, Duchain stepped into it, and then the stage rolled out again.

A woman stopped at Will's table, said, "Lonesome, honey?"

"Get away, Sally," he said, without thinking. and shook her hand off his shoulder. He got up and hurried out into the street, and Arch Gannon called to him as he glanced aimlessly around, his lonesomeness worse than a sickness.

"I decided to come back and talk to you, Will," Arch said. "Saw Duchain get on the stage. The Lord only knows where he goes. Stays away for almost a week at a time."

"So?"

"So I don't have to tell you something you should find out for yourself, Will. The Curry Comb lies out there on those acres Abel was keeping for his son that never came back. Take a ride out there, Will."

He stared at Arch, as if trying to read what the man was hiding behind his sharp, gray eyes. "All right," he said finally. "I'll go out there," and went on to the tie-rail.

AN HOUR later found Will coming out of an old game trail he well remembered, and it brought him to the lip of a low-hanging bluff that looked out over a pasture well-grazed over. Beyond that was a winding creek, showing silvery in the thin moonlight, and only a mile beyond its widest bend was a set of ranch buildings.

He went slack in the saddle, his thoughts dismal, and feeling some regret. But the nearness of a person he had never been able to forget sent a pleasant shiver through him, and made his heart pound against the silence. He rode on, crossed the creek on a planked bridge, and kept his eyes on the lamplight showing in the windows of the sprawling log and stone ranchhouse.

Two punchers came out of the bunkhouse when he rode through the gate, and one called out insolently when he kept on riding toward the house. "There's no jobs here, saddle bum!"

"An old friend of the family," Will threw back, and had to laugh bitterly within himself. He rode up to the porch and got out of the saddle, aware that the dampness of the night had put stiffness in his muscles. He wondered if the years had been kinder to Anne.

When he stepped to the door and knocked, he heard a stirring inside, the creak of a rocker, and then the sound of slow footsteps. This made him wonder for Anne had always been quick in her movements. The door opened, and Anne Duchain looked out at Will Mundeen and quickly recognized him.

"Will!" she said hoarsely, a thin hand flying to her throat.

Her hair, once a soft rich brown was mostly white. In those eyes that once reminded him of horsechestnuts freshly cracked from their burrs, was a kind of pain. Their sparkle was gone, and they had receded into listless dark pools.

"May I come in, Anne?" he asked.

"Of course, Will. Please forgive my rudeness." She stepped aside and he passed into the big living room, and there was several moments of silence, terrible and disconcerting, as they looked at each other after twenty years. Anne's lips suddenly trembled, and all at once she was crying. "Will," she cried out, and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Will!"

He was sorely tempted but he held his place. She was Duchain's wife. Her feelings under control once more, she walked to a table and sat down, folding her hands in her lap. She looked at Will, then suddenly called out, "Johnny!"

Will heard someone moving in another part of the house, and soon there were footsteps that seemed stumbling and uncertain. The sweat came out on Will Mundeen's face as the sounds built up. A kid about seventeen years of age finally came into the room, bitterness and embarrassment plain in his eyes. He had Duchain's mouth and chin, and Anne's brown eyes and hair. Will tried not to look at the boy's useless legs.

"I want you to meet Will Mundeen, Johnny," Anne said stiffly.

The boy's mouth twisted into a mockery of a smile. He said, "How are you, Mundeen? You're the man my father drove out of town."

"Johnny!" Anne said sharply.

Will held up his hand. "It's true, isn't it? Let the boy talk, Anne."

"He always bragged about it, Mundeen," Johnny Duchain said defiantly. "Hell, I guess it was all he had to brag about. Why didn't you stay and face him that time, and kill him?" The boy turned as quickly as his crippled legs would permit and laboriously made his way out of the room. After what seemed an hour, a door slammed behind him. Will felt very sick.

He met Anne's tortured eyes, and she said, "When he was twelve, it happened. His father put him on a horse most of his hired hands had failed to ride. He drove him into the saddle with a whip. The horse threw Johnny and trampled him." Tears came into her eyes again, and Will had to wait. "I made a poor choice, Will. I was a stupid woman!"

He sat down near the fireplace, a hate for Duchain beginning to burn through him. He blamed himself for all this.

"He has gambled most of our money away, Will. And nearly half of our cattle. He's drunk more than half the time, and I have a good idea that I'm not the only woman in his life."

Will lifted his eyes from the floor and looked at Anne again. "Damn him!" he said. "Blast his soul!" He got to his feet and paced the floor. "I thought you had finished with me that time, Anne. You said as much. If I had known I'd had one slim chance left, I wouldn't have run away." He stopped close to her chair and looked down at her, and knew he loved her despite the beauty she had lost.

"You're his wife, Anne. What can a man do?"

"Nothing, Will," she said almost in a whisper, and brushed a hand across her eyes. She laughed bitterly. "Until death do us part. I've prayed that it would, one way or the other."

He hurried to the door. "I'll be around, Anne," was all he could think to say.

He went out, closing the door softly behind him. He rode away, oblivious to the presence of two men standing in the dark of the cottonwoods not far from the ranchhouse, and uncertain of the direction in which he wanted to go. He left the straps loose, and the horse took him to the hills northeast of the town of Bitter Root and into a thick stand of pine. He dropped out of the saddle to the soft pine-spills and thought of what Charley DeMoss had said, and nodded. *Don't ever go back, Will.* He kept thinking, then asked himself where an aging cowpuncher could go and erase the memory of the only woman he had ever wanted.

The growing hate for Duchain decided him, and after he had snapped a third cigarette stub away, he got into the saddle and rode directly toward Bitter Root. He was too old now for the chuck line to say nothing of keeping up with salty young cusses packing the payrolls of the cow outfits. Perhaps his just being around might give the woman some comfort. He rode in and stabled his horse, then crossed the street to the hotel. Arch Gannon, it seemed, had been waiting for him. The man came out of the saloon and into the lobby, his eyes deeply curious.

"Well, Will?"

"I'm not discussing it with you, Arch, nor anybody else," Will said, and walked to the clerk's cubicle in the far corner. "Give me a room. The cheapest you've got," he said.

"I stuck up for you that time," Gannon said sourly. "Looks like I was wrong."

"Mind your own damn business, Arch," he said, and walked toward the stairs.

HE SLEPT until noon, and it was well toward one o'clock before he went into the restaurant next to the big dry goods store. Three punchers came in and took a table in the corner next to the window. Will Mundeen stared at the guns they wore and he thought back. It must have been, he figured, nearly ten years since he had packed a gunbelt. When a man is pushing forty, his eyes can play tricks with him, and that's the time for a man to put away his sixgun. He was finishing his apple pie when a fat man older than himself came in and glanced around the room. He wore an old fancy vest over his blue denim shirt, and old blue serge trousers tucked into scuffed boots. Will Mundeen met the man's glance, then put his coffee mug down. The man came directly to his table.

"You happen to be looking for a job, mister?" the fat man said. "I'm Sid Forsythe, owner of the Diamond T. Don't figure you can do much riding, but I need an odd job man. Help around the home ranch, and with the haying."

"I don't figure I'm that old yet, For-

sythe," Will said, his eyes snapping. "But thanks just the same."

"Pride, huh?" the rancher said, a touch of disdain in his voice. "Try eating it sometime, mister."

Will had moments of regret as the man left the restaurant. He could have swallowed his pride, he thought. He mentally counted his assets and they amounted to the large sum of thirty-two dollars and a few cents. He went out and cruised the walks, dismally contemplating the future and telling himself he should ride away from the present. But his hate for a man was pyramiding and fogging his rational thinking. Toward late afternoon he took a ride out into open country and it was well after dark when he returned, calling himself a fool that he had.

The next day was as long and as aimless, but on the third afternoon when he had just finished shaving in his hotel room, a knock came on his door. There was a grim urgency in that knock, and then a voice said, "Open up, Mundeen!"

Will toweled the small patches of lather from his face, then walked to the door and swung it open. Rufe Duchain stood there, his red-rimmed eyes hot with anger. They cut in and through Will, but seemed dull in comparison to the words that soon came from his lips.

"You came back, you sneaking dog!" Duchain said. "You call on a man's wife when he's away, Mundeen. Maybe you found out what I did a long time ago, that she's in love with you."

His words seemed to boom throughout the frame building, and Will knew that many men had heard. Doors began to open. There were steps on the stairs, and then two men moved in behind Duchain, their faces twisting into knowing smiles.

"Duchain," Will said, surprised at his self-control. "I did call on Anne. I saw the boy you crippled, and if there's anything lower that crawls than you, I've never heard of the snake."

Duchain seemed about to lunge at Will Mundeen, then thought better of it. He yelled, his face gray with anger, "I drove you out once, Mundeen. I'll do it again before the sun goes down. Get yourself a gun if you've got the guts. Six o'clock, Mundeen. That's the time you get on your horse and ride. Stay one minute over that time and you'll be dead." He turned and walked toward the stairs.

Will Mundeen shut the door, and leaned against it, a kind of laughter rolling out of his throat. Time was nothing. Today, yesterday had returned. He went over to the bed and sat down, and from it he had a vista of the mouth of the street and he could see himself riding out of it, and remembered the hell that flamed inside young Will Mundeen. He knew he would not suffer it over again. He got up and crossed the room to the oak commode, and picked up his old silver watch. It said twelve minutes to five.

Will Mundeen sat down again and considered. He weighed his chances. Duchain, no doubt, would be quicker than he getting that gun from its holster, but he had noticed the havoc that too much drink had done to the man's eyes and hands. His hands were as old, but still as steady as a rock, and he had not found use for spectacles yet. It looked as if the odds were about even, as they had been in the long ago.

That was all Will Mundeen asked. He got up and walked to the window and looked out toward the hills, toward the Curry Comb, and he knew he would not be friendless when he faced up to Rufe Duchain. He suddenly laughed, swinging around and pinning his shoulders against the wall. How many men ever got a second chance? How many?

The news spread like a wind-blown fire through the town and well beyond it, and when Will walked out of the hotel and down the walk to the gunsmith's at quarter to six, the street was filling. He went into the shop and he said, "I want to hire a gun for a few minutes. And a belt. Please load the gun for me."

"Then you're Mundeen," the gunsmith said. He brought out a gunbelt empty of shells, and a Colt which he proceeded to load. He watched Mundeen, a crinkle of friendliness around his eyes. "I wish you

luck, friend," he said when he handed over the sixgun. "I'm certain I'm not the only one. Don't rush it, take your time."

"Thanks," Will said, and dropped the gun in its holster. It seemed to weigh a hundred pounds. He went to the saloon and had one drink, aware of the grim silence blanketing the customers at the long bar, of their furtive and impersonal glances. He let the whisky in his glass last until six o'clock, and then he walked out into the street and saw Rufe Duchain coming out from under the shade of the board awning in front of the barber shop. The man was less than thirty feet away.

DUCHAIN stopped, backed away a few more steps, and called out, "Go for it, Mundeen!" and swiftly let his right hand drop.

He fired before Will had his sixgun clear of leather, but he was far from being a professional and his bullet just brushed Will's sleeve. His fitful curse was drowned out by the blast of the other man's gun, and then he laughed mockingly when he heard the bullet slice the air a good six inches from his head. Duchain took two lurching steps forward and fired again, and Will felt a heavy blow just below his shoulder that turned him half around. Quickly he recovered and pitched to his left, and was on one knee firing even as the third bullet from Duchain's gun sang over his head.

Will threw two shots. The first one missed, but the second one caught Rufe Duchain full in the stomach and spun him back on his heels. He threw his arms up and then they seemed to break at the wrists, and the sixgun fell into the dust at his feet. He fell over it, flat on his face. Will Mundeen, no pity in him, watched Duchain claw convulsively at the dirt for a few moments, and he was stepping toward the walk when three men rushed out into the street to lift Duchain up. Will saw the gunsmith standing there with the crowd, and he unbuckled the gunbelt and handed it to the man.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked.

"Not a red cent, Mundeen. Let me buy you a drink."

Will turned and watched them carry Duchain away, toward the undertaking parlor, and suddenly he felt a strong reaction. His legs shook under him, and the sweat came out on his face.

"I'll be happy to have that drink," he said, and suddenly lifted his left arm after seeing drops of his blood on the walk at his feet.

"You've been hit," a puncher said. "Get to the doctor, Mundeen. The drinks will keep."

It was late the next morning when he went down into the hotel lobby and took a chair near the window, galled at this enforced idleness and dreading a thing he was going to have to do. Arch Gannon came in and talked for awhile, and then Arch turned his head toward the entrance.

"Morning, Mrs. Duchain," he said, and went on out.

Will looked up as she came directly in front of him, and he fearfully awaited her judgement. Quickly he said, "He forced it, Anne. All the people will tell you. Did you want me to run again?"

"Don't ever punish yourself for it, Will," she said. "It was a better end than he deserved. The Almighty knows I tried to stir up a bit of pity for him, but I could not. When you feel able, I want you to hire out as my foreman."

He got up from his chair. "After what happened, Anne? Could you blame people for thinking that—"

"Will, we've lost twenty years, and you are worrying about other people?" She smiled a little. "It is a business arrangement."

"All right, Anne. You've got a foreman," he said.

"Thank you, Will." She smiled at him.

A few minutes later he watched her drive the buckboard out of town. She sat very straight on the seat, and once again he saw that proud tilt of her head. She was a proud woman and he would bide his time. He had waited twenty years, and one more would seem little more than a week. He had her answer, he knew. A promise had been crystal clear in her eyes.

TRAP

By W. J. REYNOLDS

They killed his brother in a gun trap, but Clay Jarred was a lot tougher man to whipsaw than his brother

THE Arizona sun shone straight down and the metal latch of the stagecoach door burned Clay Jarred's hand as he unlatched it and stepped into the striking blaze of noon. Two hefty, sweating drummers followed Clay out of the stage, their tight checkered pants sticking and showing spots of moisture. Clay nodded to Sheriff Anse Kilton leaning against the depot's wall then he moved away to the opposite end out of the way, and commenced to beat dust from his clothes with his hat. The grunting station attendant was unloading baggage, handling it roughly, short tempered in the heat.

When his sacked saddle and warbag were unloaded, Clay dragged them to the far corner of the station's wooden awning then stood there wiping his face and neck dry with his bandana while his glance probed about the town's street. Only one change that he could see since his last hurried visit two years ago. The Cattle King Saloon across the street from the stage depot still had the eyesore of a weed grown and rusty can littered lot beside it, but the saloon itself showed a repaired and prosperous front. A new name appeared on it too, Logan Mitchel. A name unfamiliar to Clay but the fourth one, that Clay remembered, to try and make a going business of the Cattle King.

From the corner of his eye, Clay caught the movement behind him, the portly, sweating figure of Anse Kilton.

"Have a nice trip, Clay?" he asked.

Clay turned. "So-so, Anse. How's the sheriffing business?"

There was a touch of asperity in Kilton's voice. "When you get through ignoring everybody, Clay, come up to the office and I'll give you what I know. For free."

"Why, thanks, Anse."

They stood silently for seconds, the portly sheriff, seemingly braced inwardly against something, the slab muscled, relaxed man with the cold gray eyes. Then slowly, Clay's eyes lost their coldness, and he smiled deliberately letting Anse Kilton see the brief amusement.

"Sorry, Anse, that I didn't appear to properly appreciate your office."

Kilton had always been easily needled. He was, Clay knew, a fairly good sheriff, but his father had been an old mountain man, the town drunk in later years, and it was a sore spot with Anse. At Clay's words his mouth tightened, and anger showed in his widening blue eyes. He wheeled away, and Clay, still smiling to himself, shouldered his saddle and carrying his warbag in the other hand, followed him the half-black to the sheriff's office and jail. He dropped the saddle and warbag on the porch and followed Anse inside.

It was hot in the office but with windows and doors open it was less hot than outside. Kilton indicated a chair then sank into his own chair at the desk. Clay rolled up a smoke, taking his time, aware that Kilton's sensitive feelings were still ruffled. He lighted up and returned Kilton's stare blandly.

Kilton leaned forward in his chair and said bluntly, "We all know what kind of man Gene was, or wasn't. All but you, Clay, you made a pet of the kid and ruined what chance he ever had if any. You refused to see his purely bad points, you worked while he helled around. He never had a real friend because he'd do the man dirt before he could, he wasn't capable of understanding what a friend was, he thought he was someone to take the blame for him, wipe his shoes and fetch and carry. Gene leaned to fancy clothes, poker, liquor and women. In short, he was no damn good. With all respect to the dead."

"You through, Anse?"

"No. You worked like a dog to help him along and save money to buy that ranch. You left here and took all the dirty and dangerous jobs you could find to make money faster. It took eight years to make it then, to buy the Double J so the kid would have a home at last, be a partner, carry his part of the load. You left him to manage it while you worked to buy better stuff to stock it with. So the kid got married to one of Mitchel's women."

Clay flipped his butt out the door. "Get to the point, Anse." Only his eyes were cold now, the only sign of anger.

"I shall. He got in a row with two of Mitchel's housemen. It came to words. The housemen, Ackby and Cheston, backed down. The kid, being what he was, didn't have any sense. He rode them, pushed them. Mitchel fired the two of them and they left town. They came back one day and Gene started riding them with rough talk and challenges. They tried to pass it off, but he wouldn't have it. He had to be the whole hog. He braced them flatly, wanting them to crawl. So they killed him. Cheston shot him, while Ackby, near as I can find out, made the first move then dived behind the livery. I arrested them and the coroner's jury freed them. I told them to get and they did. Last I heard they were in Tomby."

"Where were you at the time of the shooting, Anse?"

Kilton held his temper. "I was out at the K Bar serving a subpoena."

"It was a cold deck, Anse. They braced him—"

"He braced them," Anse said, interrupting.

"—separated, Ackby at the corner of the livery. He reached, getting Gen's attention, fell behind the corner, and Cheston killed him. It was a setup."

"A jury freed them," Kilton said stubbornly. "I want no more gunfighting here,

Clay. Don't you start no trouble. I can't stop you from going to Tomby or hunting them, I don't give a damn. But just don't start anything here, or you'll go in the jug in a hurry. Is that clear?"

Clay looked at Kilton with his cold stare. "Sure, Anse, I hear you."

Kilton's face got redder and he was silent for a full minute. When he had his anger in hand, he said somewhat thickly, "I know, Clay, you're hell on wheels, you never got a dime you didn't have to pull up by the roots, you're a tough boy and I'm just a two-bit sheriff, but, Clay, you'd better take it that I ain't just talking."

"All right, Anse. Where's Vannie?"

"Out at the ranch. Claimed you'd expect it of her."

"Claimed? Why claimed?"

Kilton's temper fired up. "Don't try to ride me over words, Clay. That's what she said."

CLAY sensed an uneasiness in Kilton, a worry that something was building that he couldn't handle. He'd rode Clay Jarred pretty hard with his tongue. Two men had set Gene Jarred up and killed him, taking their time about it. The sheriff had done his duty then run them out of the county. That would seem sufficient for the sheriff. Then why the sound and fury? Why the repeated warning of starting trouble, obviously seriously meant. Claimed was the way the sheriff had been thinking of Vannie's actions.

"You don't like Vannie, do you, Anse? Just because she sang in a saloon. Why not, Anse? Was she more than a singer?"

"I don't have to like or dislike her," Kilton said flatly. "I didn't see her do anything besides sing."

Clay came to his feet. "Thanks for your time, Anse, you must be a busy man."

"Clay," Kilton said through his teeth, "sometime that acid tongue will get you shot."

"I'll see you, Anse," Clay said, and walked out.

Clay walked down the street and nodded to familiar faces. He'd once known most of these people as any young cowboy would know them, but that was—yes, nine years ago. It didn't seem that long, for the years had been crowded and busy. Trail towns, gold camps, freight lines, anywhere there was trouble that needed a strong hand.

He paused in the shade of the stage station again, rolling up a smoke, frowning with his memories. Come to think of it, he had made mighty few friends in those years. He'd known a lot of people, yes, but he had not made friends. To be a friend you needed to share a common time and routine, give and take. He had not had time for that. He had made money, and two years ago he'd made a fast trip in to buy the old Huffaker place and install Gene there. Gene had married shortly after that, quickly, as he done most things.

He flipped away the butt. The last two years had been hectic, troubleshooting for a stage line, establishing a new route in northern Idaho and Montana, the railroad in Colorado, and trying to ration Gene in his demands for money, money—this for the ranch and that for the ranch. The kid had sure took hold, he should have the place in top shape, ready for the purebloods Clay was to get at the end of this year.

Clay's hand raked the money belt he carried, seven thousand, not enough but it would have to do now. He'd have to stay and see after the place.

He moved his shoulders restlessly. He would have something to say to Ackby and Cheston if they hung around this country, but right now he needed to get the feel of this basin again, to find out why people shied around him, what was eating Kilton that concerned Clay Jarred. He had a lot of things to do and he'd best get to doing them.

He looked across the street at the Cattle King Saloon and rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. Vannie had worked there before Gene married her. Clay had not had time to know Vannie well in the short two weeks they had been up in Idaho with him. He had financed that trip

and remembered Vannie as a petite blonde, with large and innocent blue eyes, a gay girl with a quicksilver laugh. She had seemed nice enough and Gene had been crazy about her. He found his thoughts straying then to another blonde, a golden blonde with blue eyes, but these were straight eyes, honest and sometimes blunt and even caustic. There were many similar points between Vannie and Sue Gage and yet there was nothing similar about them.

Abruptly, Clay shrugged away the reverie and was about to step into the street when a bonnetted woman passed. He paused touching his hat politely at the familiar face, but the name eluded him. She stared at him, nodded jerkily and hurried on, a queer expression fleeting across her face.

A rising irritation possessed Clay. Something was sure eating these good people, and it was more than a shy reserve because of the reputation he had earned for himself. It looked almost as if they were afraid of him, or afraid for him. Something they knew that he did not, and something that no one intended to tell him.

He walked across the street and entered the Cattle King Saloon, and was struck at once by the prosperous air of the place. A long bar extended two thirds of the way along the east wall, two rows of tables down the center, and booths along the west wall. This had been the extent of the old place, but not so now.

It had always been a barnlike place and the back filled with junk. Now about the end of the bar on the west wall the booths intsead of stopping, extended on to the back wall and half across, curtained for semi-privacy. Where the booths left off, a stage went catty-cornered and between the stage and the end of the bar, varnished stairs rose to the room upstairs. It was easy to figure what was there. It had the air of a money maker. Logan Mitchel obviously knew his business.

There was only a scattering of customers during this noon hour, and as Clay entered, one of three men eating at a back tabel, rose and climbed the stairs. He was a houseman, no doubt. The man came back as Clay had his first drink, and resumed eating.

Now if Mitchel beards me, Clay thought, the ball will have begun to roll!

A slender, handsome man in shirt sleeves and a flowered vest, came down the stairs, entered the backbar through a flap door and came on up the bar opposite Clay. He smiled and pushed Clay's money back. "Afternoon, stranger. First one is always on the house. Welcome to the Cattle King. I'm Logan Mitchel."

"Clay Jarred."

MITCHEL was a good actor, too, Clay thought, his surprise appeared to be almost genuine.

"Well," Mitchel said, a smile on his lips, "I've heard much of you, Mr. Jarred. It's a pleasure to know you."

They shook hands. Mitchel said, "I deeply regret the reason for your early return, Mr. Jarred, I liked Gene, and despite some of the stories I heard, he appeared to be settling down well. He stole my prettiest girl, Vannie. She's a good kid and I was happy for them. She wasn't a regular girl, you understand, she merely sang. I was reluctant but she was desperate and too proud to take plain help. I saw to it she was not molested. It was a shock about Gene. I did everything I could to stop it, firing those two housemen. I hope you won't hold it against me."

A real mouthful of words there, Clay thought. He said, "Should I hold it against you?"

Mitchel shook his head and ran a slender hand through curly black hair, his dark brown eyes wide and earnest. Too damned wide and earnest. "I hope not, Mr. Jarred. Kilton will tell you I did my best. A sorry thing, a sorry thing indeed."

"Well, thanks," Clay said. "For giving me your side. I see no point in being sore at you."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Mitchel said, and he was sincere then.

He's pleased, Clay thought, but for a different reason than he wants me to be-

lieve. Clay nodded. "I'll see you."

"Come in again, Mr. Jarred," Mitchel said as Clay walked out.

Now what is that slick character's stake in this? Clay wondered. All that gabble of wordage was smoke for something. And Vannie is too proud to accept help unearned. Well, well! She wasn't too proud to use his, Clay's, money, not too proud to hint up in Idaho that Gene would need quite a bit more now that he was married. Clay felt a twinge of guilt at the unloyal thought of Gene. Why shouldn't she take help from her husband and his brother? They were partners, or about to be.

He shied away from such thoughts, having felt guilty for some time over not signing the partnership papers Gene had sent the day he was twenty-one and the letters he, Clay, had ignored urging the early return of them. It was too late now.

Clay turned toward the livery. He'd get a horse and ride out to the ranch. Maybe Vannie could shed some light on the thing everybody was shying at.

He was halfway down the street when a woman stepped out of a store onto the sidewalk directly in front of him. She was a tall woman, golden hair in braids and in a coronet on her head. She wore a riding skirt of buckskin and a white blouse. Her wide lips held a faintly derisive smile, her eyes were very blue and bright, charged with some powerful emotion.

"Well, well," she said. "If this isn't Mr. Jarred, the basin's famous son, arriving on time and breathing fire and brimstone!"

"Howdy, Sue," Clay said, and in him was the sudden excitement, the instantly rampant desire that Sue Gage always set off in him. "You're twice as pretty as ever Sue, and your tongue is just as sharp."

"I'm sorry, Clay, that your homecoming had to be like this."

"I seem about the only one sorry, Sue."

"Gene wasn't one to endear himself to people, Clay. Only his brother."

Knowing they would be fighting in another half minute about Gene, he shrugged then smiled at her. "Is there a lucky man, Sue?"

"How do you mean that, Mr. Jarred?" But a defiant color ran in her cheeks.

"Married?"

"I'm an old maid, Clay. No one will have me."

He never felt more helpless, a victim of his emotions when he faced Sue Gage. "Then I'm lucky, Sue."

For a moment she was blushing and confused, then her glance dropped to the pistol in his holster and the confusion was gone. "I suppose nothing will do now but to kill a couple of men."

His face grew sober. "Such things usually fall to the next of kin, Sue."

She was suddenly stiff and determined. "Clay, can't you face the fact that Gene was no good? He wouldn't have been killed if he hadn't had such a big mouth. Ackby and Cheston are gunmen, and equally no good, but they took plenty off Gene. He talked himself to death. Anybody will tell you so."

"It was a setup," he said. "Maybe the actual killing was as you say, but what was behind it?"

She looked at him steadily, then some secret thought smoothed her face into blankness. "All right, Clay. I see it's no use." She turned back into the store, and he could hear her heels clicking sharply toward the rear. He moved thoughtfully on.

He got a rangy bay from the livery and led it back to the sheriff's office and was tossing on his saddle when he heard Kilton come out. Clay cinched the saddle, tied on his warbag then turned to look at Kilton.

"Any last words, Anse?"

There was a queer tightness in Kilton, but his voice was amiable, casual, which indicated that Kilton was being subtle. "You had a will made in Gene's favor, didn't you, Clay?"

Clay's attention sharpened. "Yes."

"Guess it would go to Vannie now, eh?"

"I think so," Clay said. "I hadn't considered it."

"See you, Clay," Kilton drawled and turned back into the office.

CLAY took one step toward the office, then stopped, rubbed his jaw, and turned to mount up. Anse Kilton was being subtle, he had his back up at Clay and he'd said all he was going to say. Clay rode down the street. Now what the hell was Kilton getting at? He knew damned well there was no one but Clay and Gene, and with Gene dead, that left Vannie, she was his sister-in-law.

Temper darkened his eyes. But an innate fairness gradually ate away his anger. They all knew how he felt about Gene, he'd punched a lot of jaws over the kid. What had Gene done that nobody would tell him? That nobody would tell him because they wanted no part of Clay Jarred's temper?

Well, by hell, he'd find out himself!

He felt a twinge of guilt. Had his miserliness the last few years helped to get Gene killed? Get him into something over his depth? He didn't see how. Gene knew he was saving every cent he could so they could really set the ranch up, and half of everything would have been Gene's. Clay had intended to sign those partnership papers the minute he got back. He faced the thing he'd always dodged and excused, Gene' weakness and impulsiveness. Actually, he'd known in the back of his mind that Gene needed a firm hand, he'd not signed those papers because he was afraid of what Gene would do, some fool stunt or deal that might ruin them before he came home.

His mouth had suddenly a bitter set. Well, maybe Vannie could throw some light on what everybody was shying from.

Ahead of Clay, the grassy flatland of the basin slanted a little to a willow and cottonwood fringed creek. Underbrush reached outward from the water making a thick cover and forming a tunnel for the road where it crossed the stream. From long habit, Clay's eyes searched the cover in sweeping, practised glances. A sudden alertness ran through Clay Jarred and he was instantly wary. But his seemingly carelessness did not change but his senses were trigger tight, searching for whatever it was that had warned him.

His searching glances, playing back and forth under his tilted hat brim, kept coming back to a cottonwood bole to the left of the road, and it was there he found what had warned him. A slight bulge, that became larger then disappeared. Clay did not change his attitude or the gait of his horse, but his attention was rivetted there now and soon he saw the slowly lifting black tube of the rifle's barrel.

The range was slightly less than a hundred yards and yet the man there seemed in no hurry to fire. Obviously, he liked a dead cinch, or he was rattled. Clay kept going, coming to the first of the underbrush. The man would fire soon, unless he waited until Clay was crossing the stream and take a back shot.

Clay kept going. He had no rifle and soon now he would have a good chance with his six-shooter. The range had narrowed to fifty yards.

More of the man showed beside the tree and the rifle settled on Clay. Clay spurred the bay and left the saddle. The rifle bellowed and the bullet's sound was dangerously close. Clay hit the ground behind the undergrowth, and was instantly crabbing along the road out of sight of the bushwhacker. More bullets cracked and popped the brush where Clay had fallen as the man pumped the rifle frantically.

A damn fool, Clay thought, he's rattled as all hell. He should take up a less dangerous occupation.

Brush cracked as the rifle became suddenly silent, and Clay heard the bay circling, then the pound of hoofs as the horse headed for town and its stable. That, he thought grimly, ought to rattle the fellow even worse. It was only three miles from this creek back to town and the way the bay was traveling he'd make it in a hurry. The horse galloping riderless into town would bring men in a hurry.

Clay moved slowly along the tunnel of

the road, his ears cocked, listening. The man was out in the underbrush and he'd have to make some noise when he moved and he'd have to move soon.

Clay reached the creek, a ten foot wide stream no more than six inches deep and with a gravelly bed. He moved quickly and silently then, down the stream, just out of the water, his boots silent in the damp earth. Then he stopped as he saw the horse tied ahead of him to a willow, its ears twisting at him then toward the bushwhacker. With a grim smile, Clay stepped against the willows and waited, six-shooter tilted in his hand.

The next move belonged to the bushwhacker and he'd have to make it soon.

Furtive, hurried sounds increased in the underbrush, then became a man bulling in a panic. Abruptly the man hove into sight, a scrawny man with a three day beard and wild eyes. He ripped the slipnot loose in his bridle reins.

"Hold it there," Clay said.

The man froze for a pair of seconds, then dropped his rifle and whirled, stroking up his six-shooter. He was fast but it was the speed of panic. His first shot whipped four feet wide of Clay and then Clay shot him once through the chest. The man turned loose his gun, tried to shout and walked on his toes in an arc and fell into the stream, he struggled briefly and then went lax, head buried in the water.

Clay let his breath run out in a long sigh, considered pulling the man out of the water and decided against it. He was dead and Kilton could see the story when he came. Clay sat down in the road and rolled up a smoke.

HE WAS half through his third smoke when he heard them coming, the drum of running horses. Clay got to his feet and walked up the road where they could see him. It was Kilton and half a dozen others who had come out of curiosity.

To Kilton's, "What happened?" Clay told them, indicated the dead man, and sat down again while Kilton ranged the place verifying Clay's story by the sign. Finally, Kilton came stamping back to the waiting men and Clay, his face angry and cranky.

"Clay, I told you I wanted no shooting around here and I meant it!"

Clay looked at the sheriff coldly. "Now you've told me, tell whoever is trying to kill me. Maybe you know who wants to wipe out the Jarreds, Anse." Clay came to his feet and his eyes were flaring and angry. "A little of this goes a long way, Kilton, get the hell off my back until you can show better cause than you got now." The violence in Clay was close to the surface then and it made Kilton stir uneasily.

He tried to glower Clay down then, "It's my job to keep the peace around here."

Clay beat his rising anger down, he knew Kilton was trying to save some face, and he could stand a certain amount of it and no more. "All right, Anse, now who is this bird and who'd he work for?"

"Kip Kirby," Kilton growled. "A hanger-on, and odd jobber and small time gun."

"You want me at the inquest? I guess I'll have to go for a horse anyhow."

Kilton said, "I guess the story is plain enough. Take Kirby's horse, it's a livery mount. If Doc wants you, I'll send word."

It was nearly dark when Clay pulled up on a small knoll overlooking the Double J buildings. He hooked a leg around the saddle horn, and rolled up a smoke, relaxing and letting himself have his small time of pride in a place he could call his own. The ranch was small in acreage, but it had been well built, and could be a fine small ranch. Huffacker had built with squared logs, cranky about his buildings and kept them neatly whitewashed. He'd promised Clay long ago that when he sold he would give Clay first chance. He had, two years ago. Clay had not had the money to buy all the cattle too, but he had managed four hundred head. Thinking they would keep Gene and by upkeep and small improvements while Clay earned money for better stock.

Well, that part was not changed, only Gene, he was not here to share it. He

would have to talk with Vannie, hear her plans, and this part he dreaded. Should he still give Vannie half? Was she entitled to it? He would have to stay to operate the ranch, and that meant that Vannie could not. Maybe she'd rather live in town, have a small business she could run, like a dresshop maybe.

He stubbed out the butt on his boot and rode on toward the house in the growing dusk, his eyes taking in the shaggy look of the place, the sagging corrals, a barn door askew, no whitewash had been used in at least two years. Gene must have been awfully busy on the range and forgot the ranch buildings in his enthusiasm. It would be like Gene to work his head off at one thing while something else completely escaped his notice. He pulled up and called his hello.

A woman's shape appeared in the doorway and Clay said, "It's Clay, Vannie."

"Clay! Oh, Clay!" She was running toward him and as he swung down she came into his arms, her own around his neck, pressing against him. She was crying.

He patted her awkwardly, "Here, here, now, buck up, kid."

"Oh, Clay, I'm so happy you're here! You heard about those horrible men, you—"

"I know, Vannie, I know," he said gently. He looked up as a man came from the bunkhouse, and paused nearby. "Who is that?"

"I am Juan, señor, I worked for Señor Gene."

"Yes," Vannie said dabbing at her eyes, "Gene said he needed a man, and Juan's wife was company while Gene was gone."

"I will take your horse," Juan said.

They went into the house, Vannie clinging to his arm and Clay felt the wave of helplessness, silently wishing this woman part of it was over with. Comforting a bereaved woman was out of his line.

He watched her as she lighted a lamp, seeing the little girl slenderness of her, the way her pale hair was mussed where she had flung herself upon him, and he evaded the wide blue eyes still close to tears. "I'm sorry, Vannie," he said. "I didn't get the message up in the hills. I came as soon as I could."

"It doesn't matter, Clay," she said in a small voice. "You could not have helped Gene by then. He was terribly upset lately because you hadn't returned the partnership papers. He thought maybe you'd changed toward him."

"Why, Vannie. Hell, he knew better than that."

She shook her head, and dabbed at the big tears that slid down her cheeks. "He kept worrying, even when I said you were just too busy, he said if something happened, I'd be left alone again."

Clay shifted helplessly, and lifted his hands toward her and she was again in his arms, soft and clinging to him. "You're not alone, Vannie, I'll see you're fixed all right. We'll work out something." As she quieted a little, he said, "I got the story about the shooting and the poker quarrel, Vannie, but there's more to it. Why does everybody give me the slant eye? Was there another angle?"

"Angle? Those men murdered Gene! And that idiot sheriff turned them loose, Clay."

"I know. But what else is making people give me a funny look? Was Gene in some other kind of trouble? Any trouble in the basin?"

Her eyes peeped up at him and for a moment he could have sworn they were hard and calculating before the tears started dripping again. "Trouble? I don't know of any trouble, Clay. The folks never liked me because I worked at the Cattle King. Sometimes I could just die from shame."

He patted her shoulder again. "Well, did Gene have any trouble with anybody? Were he and Mitchel on the outs?"

"Oh, no! Mr. Mitchel is a nice man. He treated me like—like a father. He fired the men who killed Gene."

"I know," Clay said. "But there is more to this. Are you sure there was nothing? Gene didn't mention anything out of the way?"

"No. He would have told me. He told me all of his plans."

He was unconvinced, but let it drop. "I'll have to stay and run this place, Vannie. That means you can't stay. How'd you like to go to some of your folks?"

"I have no folks, Clay." Her little chin came up. "Gene was right, I am alone again. I don't even have a home."

"I didn't say that, Vannie. We'll work out something, you can't stay here with a bunch of men. How about a dress shop or something?"

"I don't have any money," she said, her voice quivering. "I don't even know anything about a dress shop. I'll just have to go back to the Cattle King." She was crying again.

Clay felt like a heel. He muttered. "Well, you think and maybe you'll come up with something. I have some money. We'll work it out."

"Thank you, Clay." She smiled tremulously at him as he backed out the door. He was half expecting another tearful charge.

HE CLEARED the house with relief and headed for the bunkhouse. He sure as hell had a problem on his hands with Vannie. Damn it, why did women have to bust into tears everytime somebody opened their mouth? She couldn't stay here, that was a cinch. He had the feeling that it was going to take a lot of money to dry up Vannie's tears. That meant he'd have to start from scratch with the cattle he had here.

He felt a twinge of guilt. Well, hell, Vannie was Gene's wife and deserved some consideration. He'd just have to do what he could. He could part with most of the seven thousand he had in the moneybelt, just keep a few hundred to tide him along until he could sell a few steers.

"Señor?" Clay stopped then and saw Juan coming from the barn. "I have my woman making you some supper. You are hungry, no?"

Clay grinned. "Like a bear, Juan."

"Come," Juan said, and together they walked to the bunkhouse and went in. A round faced, smiling woman was setting food on the table and she gave Clay a shy smile. "My woman, Carmen, Senor."

"Welcome, señor. You will eat now?"

"Thank you, señora. That I will." Clay sat down, his stomach contracting, mouth watering at the smell of good Mexican food. Chili, paper thin tortillas, a rich and thick beef stew, heavily seasoned with pepper, frijoles. He grinned at Carmen. "I can see why Juan is a smiling man, señora."

"You eat now," she said, flushing with pleasure.

When Clay had eaten his fill and sat back with a last cup of coffee, he asked, "How long on the Double J, Juan?"

"Six months, señor." It was a courteous answer but Clay felt a withdrawing in the Mexican vaquero.

"Juan," Clay said, "folks here look at me in a way that says there's more I don't know about Gene's death, or the reasons for it. No one will speak, yet I was ambushed today. Someone wants me dead, too. Why?"

Juan did not attempt to deny it. He shrugged. "It is not my place, señor."

"So, Clay thought, there it is. Not only is something out of kilter, but it concerns Gene and they know I'm touchy about him. Maybe it concerns Vannie too. He looked at Juan. He liked the Mexican and knew that he was honest, minded his own business. He would not express opinions which seemed to be the common knowledge. But he would answer questions, however reluctantly. "Does it concern Vannie and the ranch, Juan? And maybe another party?"

"Possibly, señor."

Clay nodded. Then bluntly, as a startling thought occurred to him, "Juan, what is the cattle tally, roughly?"

The Mexican looked uneasy, but as Clay waited, he said reluctantly, "Less than a hundred cows, señor. About thirty heifers and about the same yearling steers."

Clay closed his eyes. Maybe deep in his heart he had known it. Gene had been selling the cattle off and the increase.

63-114 August TEXAS RANGERS 85¢

He had done nothing to upkeep the ranch. It was common knowledge, of course, what everybody expected except him. But there was still more. He mentally reviewed Gene's few letters, but there was little to remember other than the need for money, and excuse. But there had been the offer for the ranch. In the last six months Gene had suggested he sell at a good profit. Three times, he'd mentioned it but Clay had paid no attention.

"Who wanted to buy this ranch, Juan?"

Juan shrugged, his face wooden, and Clay sensed Carmen's tension as she cleared the table. "I heard Señor Mitchel offered to buy." He was silent a moment, then, "There is talk of a railroad through the basin."

Well, Clay thought, it was like pulling teeth, but there it is. He knew the basin and he knew something of railroads. There was only one possible way for a railroad through the basin. Through Tincup Pass behind Double J, up the length of Double J land to the creek where Clay was ambushed. Half the distance across his land. Beyond town was government range, mostly homesteaded now.

"Who owns the land from Gravel Creek, Juan?"

"I hear that Señor Mitchel bought that land, señor."

Clay digested this in silence. But how would it help to kill Gene? The ranch belonged to Clay. But who would know that? He could guess there. Gene had to appear important. He would have bragged, and the thing was no secret for that matter, that he was a full partner. He had sold off the cattle which would indicate that he was right. Still, that wouldn't help Mitchel other than to eliminate one owner. Even that wouldn't now with Gene married, his part would leave Vannie the owner. Vannie who had worked for Mitchel. Clay instantly and uneasily shied away from the thought.

"Has there been any activity from the railroad recently, Juan?"

"Only some men at the Pass, señor. Señor Gene asked that I not mention it."

Why hadn't Vannie mentioned that? She must know it. She had said there was nothing. But she was upset, and might not attach any significance to it. That must be it.

"Thank you, Juan," he said softly.

He was riding with Juan by daylight on a swift circle of the ranch. His jaw was hard by midmorning, his gray eyes angry. For every Double J cow there was three of Gage's Big G. Finally he reined up and made a smoke with fingers that trembled a little.

"Juan, why the Big G's?"

Juan shrugged. "It was my thought that Señor Gene had this understanding with Señor Gage. Then he orders cattle drifted off. They are drifted back. Señor Gene confers with Señor Gage, he drives the cattle off again, and Señor Gage beats him. He—"

"Beats, Gene?"

"Yes. Then I am ordered to drive the cattle off. This I do. Señor Gage comes one day as I do this and holds the rope with the hangnoose in his hand. He has three men, and is very angry. He says I will not drive the steers any more. Señor Gene curses very much, but says let them alone. That is all I know, señor."

"Go back to the ranch, Juan, and start patching that corral." He sent his horse at a swinging trot toward Gage's Big G.

BUCK GAGE, a white manned, thick shouldered man, was saddling a horse at the corral as Clay approached. The cattleman, seeing Clay's approach, left the horse and walked up to the house and awaited Clay, leaning against the yard fence.

As Clay pulled up, Gage said, "Howdy, Clay. I heard you were back. Light down."

"Howdy, Buck, I don't have much time." They exchanged a few minutes of slow talk, and Clay sensed the same restraint in Buck Gage that he had in others. Maybe a wariness, too, that was close to temper. Buck wasn't a man known for his shyness.

Finally, Buck said bluntly, "What's eat-

ing on you, Clay?"

"Thought I'd ride over and get the story on your steers, Buck. Must be three-four hundred head eating Double J grass." He rolled up a smoke. "I hear you whipped Gene over them and threatened to hang Juan."

"What'd Gene write you?"

"Nothing."

"I see," Gage said, and his face started to get red, his blue eyes took a glitter. "So you lit out over here to take up his fight as usual. You just rode right over to straighten out old Buck Gage about stealing your grass and bullying poor little Gene. Well, you came to a damn good place!" Gage's face was brickred.

Clay's own temper was heating, but he held it down. "I'm waiting, Buck."

"Then wait," Buck Gage shouted. "You can go to hell!"

"If that's the way you want it, Buck. I'll start hazing those steers out of there. You can try beating me, or hanging me, but it'll be different than a kid! You can bet on that!"

Gage choked on his rage, he was opening his mouth for a bawl of fury when another voice said from the porch, "Well, if it isn't the fire and brimstone man. Mr. Clay Jarred himself! Haven't you had your man for breakfast yet, Mr. Jarred?"

"Get off that horse and I'll stomp the hell out of you!" Gage bawled.

"Dad! Stop it!" Sue Gage came quickly to stand between her father and Clay. She turned to Clay, her eyes a brilliant blue. "Mr. Jarred will eat you up, Dad. Oh, Mr. Jarred is a fire eating man. He shoots people, haven't you heard? He'll probably admit it if you ask him. A very tough and dangerous man, Dad. Keep silent and sing low, oh, very low, when he's talking to you."

"I only came over to—"

"We know why you came, Mr. Jarred," Sue said. "Haven't you been doing it for years? Gene's little irons must be pulled from the fire."

Gage had his temper in hand, he said thickly, "I'll tell you what, Clay Jarred. I'll be over there after those steers just as quick as I can get hold of my men. I'll get every last damn one, and then I'll stay off your place and you do the same damn thing for me, savvy? You're not welcome here any more! Is that good and clear?"

Clay's own temper was hard held, his face white. "I'm not hard of hearing."

Gage wheeled and almost ran for the corral, flung onto his horse and sent the animal racing away.

Sue was standing stiffly. She said, "Oh, we're a very sorry bunch over here, Mr. Jarred. We bully poor little boys and steal grass and hang people. A sorry lot indeed. You did right, jumping on us. Especially Dad. He's the sorriest of the lot, yes indeed! A range hog. Just imagine, if you can, how he sent his steers over to the Double J, free, no less. Oh, quite free, and made the helpless little boy like it. A mean man, that Buck Gage. Sorry, too! Isn't that right, Mr. Jarred? I'm sure you'll be forced to shoot him full of bullet holes before this is over."

Clay said stiffly, "I'm sorry, Sue. I only come to get the straight of it. Nobody will tell me a thing, I have to bumble along the best I can."

He turned his horse, rode ten feet and then turned a stiff face that hid his own hurt, to look back at Sue. She was still standing there, but the tears were running down her cheeks. Clay wheeled his horse again but Sue was suddenly running for the house. With a sigh, Clay turned again and rode away.

Clay's thoughts were bitter. He had just lost a man he considered his friend, What had happened to Buck Gage? He had fired up like a real guilty man whose conscience bothered him. Or an innocent man being accused unjustly. And Sue. There had been a time when he squired Sue around, both kids, true, but there had been something between Sue and Clay Jarred. They had made plans even then, each seeming to take it for granted they would get married. Clay's obsession over Gene, his desire for quick money and the dangerous jobs had changed that. The rift between them became greater and greater. Finally, Sue had bluntly told him she

would never marry him as long as he earned his money by the constant risk of his life by his gun.

Well, it was over now. Clay slapped his saddlehorn with a clinched fist, the frustrated anger a pressure inside him. Why had Gage flared up that way unless he was guilty? Why hadn't Gene told him of Gage's theft of their grass?

Impatiently, he shrugged off the mood frustration and nostalgia. He would have to keep digging. With Buck Gage and Sue down on him, there wasn't much else that could throw him. He would stamp on as many toes as necessary to clear this up.

HE RODE into the Double J at noon, ate a silent meal with Juan and Carmen, then abruptly left the bunkhouse for a talk with Vannie. Maybe he could get some answers instead of tears.

She seemed close to tears the moment he was in the house. "Clay, I thought you'd have dinner here."

"Never mind, Vannie," he said more shortly than he had intended and cursed under his breath as her eyes went wide and filmed over. "Never mind the tears." he said harshly then, "I want answers today instead of water. Was Mitchel on Gene about selling out?"

"Mitchel?" Vannie valiantly blinked back her tear. "I think he offered to once. I don't know."

"Did the kid have any agreement with Gage about pasturing his steers?"

"He had some trouble with Gage. The big brute beat Gene!" She dabbed at her tears.

"What about the railroad?"

She looked startled, and Clay could have sworn her eyes flashed with apprehension before she hid them behind her handkerchief. "Clay, why are you bullying me? I don't know which way to turn. I don't know anything about any railroad." Her voice ended in a wail.

"Why did Gene sell those cattle off? Couldn't you two struggle along on the increase from four hundred cattle plus the money he was always yelling for? Couldn't he stay away from the poker tables even after he married?"

She flared at him. "Go ask your questions someplace else. I don't have to be treated this way. I won't!" She fled to the bedroom and shut the door.

Clay stamped out, cursing under his breath. Vannie knew more than she was telling. Why? What did she have to gain? She was too damn ready with the water works.

Clay worked with Juan on the barn and corrals the rest of the afternoon in a scowling silence. Some answers were beginning to shape up that he didn't like, he refused to believe. He sought no more talks with Vannie nor did he ask Juan anymore questions. Several times he glanced up to see her at a window or in the yard. She seemed to be watching him, her attitude tense.

But the next morning shortly past breakfast, she came briskly to the corral and asked to have the buckboard hitched, she needed to go to town. Clay hitched the light wagon, and then asked, "Want me to drive you?"

She gave him a dazzling smile that made him blink. "Of course not, Clay. You go right ahead. I drive often." He stood rubbing his jaw as she drove away, a straight backed, brave little figure in a silly hat. He felt that Juan was watching him, but when he wheeled, Juan was blandly sizing up a corner post.

Almost at once, Sue Gage came jogging around the barn. After a stiff exchange of greetings, he said, "What brings you, Sue?"

"This is Thursday," Sue said.

Juan hastily moved to a pile of posts out of hearing and considered them solemnly. Clay looked at Sue. "That's very clear."

"It will be," she said. "Saddle your horse, I've something to show you."

"I don't need to watch him," he said, again stiffly.

"Watch? Oh, Dad! I checked him, he didn't steal any Double J stuff. That's not what I meant, get your horse."

He scowled at her. "I'm not in the mood for games."

"Damn it, get your horse!" she shouted

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at him. She gigged her mount twenty feet away and shook out her rope. "Or would you prefer being dragged?"

He glared at her and she returned it with interest. Her chin was stuck out, and her eyes flashed. He knew Sue Gage well enough to know she would drag him and he was too far from cover to dodge her expert loop. Abruptly, then his anger faded and he grinned a little. "All right, Sue."

Her anger faded just as quickly. "Hurry, Clay. This is one of the things you're having a fit to know."

A few minutes later he was following her, his horse at a gallop. She led him in a wide quarter circle that would take them to the basin's single uplift of land, almost a ridge that rode out of the level terrain. From it the basin could be seen from end to end and side to side. She sent her horse up the slope then slowed it down to a walk as the slope became steep. In the first scrub brush she stopped and dismounted. He followed suit.

They went on afoot, weaving through the juniper and piñon. At the top, Sue sat down with her back against a rock. "Look around, son," she said, "and tell me if you see anything interesting."

"Sue," he said. "Why—"

"Damn it, just look!" she flared at him.

He swept the basin with a glance, then the town five miles away and finally let his gaze follow the road to the branch where he'd fought Kirby yesterday. The ford was only a mile from here. He saw nothing, and was about to turn away when a rider abruptly came into sight out of the willows along the branch where it curved near town on the north side. He came steadily on, concealed from town by the willows and cottonwoods. After fifteen minutes the rider was close enough for Clay to recognize Logan Mitchel. Nothing wrong there, he was on his own land.

CLAY let his glance follow the creek where it bent around the lift where he stood and on toward the ford. He suddenly squinted, examining a movement in the willows a quarter mile away. Then he made out the heads of the team, and the wheels of the buckboard. Even as he watched, Vannie left the willows and walked out far enough to peer in his direction. Mitchel was past the rise now and halfway between Clay and Vannie. He lifted his hand and Vannie waved.

Clay stood stiffly, hearing Sue moving, felt her presence at his elbow before she moved away. Mitchel dismounted and Vannie rushed into his arms. Clay could see them clearly in the morning cleanness, the way Vannie was trying to eat Mitchel up, seeming to abandon herself completely. Clay turned away, his lips tight, and jaw ridged. Sue had made something of an understatement about this being part of what he wanted to know. At a quick survey, it could just about be the whole thing.

He saw then that Sue was already at the horses, mounted and turning away. "Sue," he called, "wait." She paid no attention.

Clay went down the slope at a lunging run. He caught her at the bottom of the slope, running his horse up beside her, grabbing her reins. It surprised him a little that she didn't break out in a rage. She merely looked at him.

"All right, Sue," he said suddenly contrite, gentle. "Thanks. Now what is the true story on those steers of Buck's?"

Sue sighed. "He paid Gene for the grass, just an agreement, no papers. Gene lost the money the next day in Mitchel's saloon. Dad wanted to hold those steers for a better market but couldn't unless he had the grass. Soon after that, Gene wanted more money. Dad naturally refused. Gene tried to bluff him out of the grass, driving the steers off. Dad knocked him down. Gene had Juan drive them off, Dad had a talk with Juan. Juan didn't know of the agreement I don't suppose." She looked at Clay steadily, "Now you know what everybody else knows, Clay. About Vannie and Mitchel."

"To hell with them. Why didn't Buck or you say anything about the steers?"

"Would you have believed it then, Clay?"

He was silent. then, "It still doesn't follow that Gene was sharing his wife."

"No. He was merely a fool as usual. It certainly follows that she would get his share of the Double J, as his wife. The Double J is busted unless you've got money in your pocket. She egged him on to spend and sell cattle, not that he needed much egging. If you had been killed yesterday, Mr. Jarred, who would have owned the Double J?" She glared at him. "If you were fool enough to sign those partnership papers he was always yapping about, she already owns half."

"I didn't sign them," he growled.

"Well, hurrah for you, Mr. Jarred. But you still have a will, it's common knowledge you were seeing after Gene. It's not too late to kill you."

"All right, Sue, I was always a fool where Gene was concerned. I was pretty young too. I was a fussing hen with one chick." His eyes softened suddenly and he said softly, "I've been a fool about a lot of things, Sue. You for one."

She did not relax, only her eyes changed and she looked away. "They'll kill you, Clay. Ackby and Cheston aren't far, maybe he's already sent for them."

"Maybe not, Sue. That's my department, remember? Guns!"

She shot him a wide glance from eyes gone very bright with held-back tears. "Damn you, Clay Jarred, keep reminding me. You're not the only fool around here." She spurred her horse.

But Clay was not having that. His own spurs hit his horse in the same instant and the powerful animal was beside her in the first leap and at her animal's head on the second. He caught the reins and hauled her up and pulled her from the saddle in a powerful heave.

"Clay!"

He held her tightly, bringing his excited horse to a stop, her startled face against his own. "Sue," he said, "Sue!" He kissed her and her lips went hard then soft and yielding under his own. Her arms went around his neck and she returned his kisses with a passion that shook her entire body. A wild exultance raced through Clay. "I love you, Sue," he said after he got his breath back. "I love you and have since I can remember."

She moaned softly and nuzzled her face against his shoulder. "Clay, don't ever fight with me again. Just kiss me like that, and I won't have a fight left in me."

Clay was still slightly dazed when he caught Sue's horse and helped her mount. She said, "Clay, what will you do? Are you going gunning for Mitchel? Please, Clay, can't you find a way besides that? I've lived with the thought of you being killed as long as I can, Clay. I've walked the floor many nights over it, I've even tried to stop loving you. I can't stand it any longer, Clay."

"I've given that up, Sue," he said gently. "I'll go farther and promise you I'll do my best to settle this without a shot."

"Then hurry."

He grinned at her. "Tired of being an old maid?"

"You don't know how tired."

"I'll fix that. Let's go get married. Now. I'll tear up that other will. Then you'll have to have me shot to get rid of me."

"Not much chance of that. But a girl has to have time for her wedding. At least a week."

"Not a day longer," he said. "Now you hike back home and tell Buck to haze his steers back. I'll hike to town and tear up that will and make another leaving Vannie just what the law allows to be legal. A dollar."

"Be careful, Clay. Mitchel won't like that."

He kissed her again and then started to drag her from the saddle. "Clay! Let me go. Scat!"

She spurred away and slowly he turned for town, grinning.

LONG association with trouble soon erased Clay's smile. He considered briefly riding upon them in the willow covert but quickly decided against it. They would know soon enough that he was wise to them and to brace them would serve no purpose other than one of personal satisfaction, and could lead to a gunfight. He'd promised Sue and he would

keep to that promise. He circled to the north of the uplift of the hill, and approached town from that direction.

But his thoughts of Vannie and Mitchel were grim and wondering. How could a man share his woman for profit? Maybe Mitchel was even married to Vannie, he'd heard of such things, but in this case he doubted it. Mitchel wasn't the marrying kind, or not to Vannie's type of woman. Mitchel would scheme and kill and become rich then he'd want a woman with social position. The way Vannie was trying to eat the saloonman alive, he wouldn't have to marry her.

Clay rode into town and tied his mount at the rail in front of the saddleshop and climbed the outside stairs to Cleary's law office. He let himself into the small anteroom and saw Cleary, feet on desk, in his cubbyhole office.

"Come in, Clay," Cleary called. "What brings you here? A social call?"

"Wisdom," Clay said. "And it comes hard."

"My boy," Cleary said, "what would the world become, cluttered up with wise men? I have no business, not that I have much anyhow."

Clay shook hands with the lawyer and stated his business. Cleary moved with alacrity for a fragile looking oldster. He got the old will and gave it to Clay. "Wisdom is a fine thing at times, Clay." Cleary was pleased, and when Clay told him to write up another will with Sue as benefactor and Vannie to have a dollar, he grinned widely. "My boy, I take back that remark about wisdom I made! Come back in an hour and it'll be done. Bring a couple of witnesses with you."

A buckboard rattled down the street and both Clay and the lawyer looked out the window. It was Vannie. She glanced toward the saddleshop, did a doubletake at the horse there, then shot a startled glance at the window. She quickly turned the buckboard into the first side street.

Cleary shot a glance at Clay. "Could it be that I read consternation on a certain face? Even alarm?"

"I'll make sure, later."

Cleary cleared this throat. "Did I see a gentleman ride out of town early this morning?"

Clay's smile was faint. "I saw a gent come from that direction to keep a date. But he was no gentleman."

"You have built quite a reputation for yourself, Clay," the lawyer said. "You also have the reputation of being stubbornly loyal, even dangerous, when someone knocks those close to you. You can't blame folks for not telling you."

Clay shook his head. "I'll see you, Ray, in an hour." He left.

Kilton was approaching the saddleshop as Clay descended the stairs. The portly sheriff was sweating and there was both irritation and grimness on his broad face. He looked at Clay sharply then up at Cleary's door. They exchanged a stiff greeting then both looked as Mitchel rode in from the north, and dismounted in front of his saloon. Mitchel gave them both a sharp glance before he went into the Cattle King.

Clay's face settled a little and he took the will in its envelope from his pocket, carefully tore off the bottom part with his signature and returned it to the envelope. He looked at a boy idling in the shade of the saddlebag and said, "Come here, son." When the boy came sidling up, he said, "Want to make a dollar?"

"You bet!"

Clay gave him the envelope. "Take that to the Cattle King and give to to Logan Mitchel. Give it to him personally."

The boy was off on a run.

Kilton's attitude was all attention then he said sharply, "That's asking for trouble, Clay."

Clay looked at Kilton in surprise. The sheriff's voice had been warning but also amiable. Kilton grinned at him, and Clay found himself smiling too. "Maybe it'll also be a Mexican standoff, Anse."

"Could be he'll drop it," Kilton agreed. "But be on your toes, Clay. I got a tip this morning that Ackby and Cheston was seen coming into town last night. I've been trying to get a spot on them all morning."

"Thanks. How about their horses?"

Kilton shook his head. "There's a pair of strange horses in Mitchel's lot behind the saloon. I checked and Mitchel said he'd bought them. I had nothing to jump him about and I'd look like a fool to get a search warrant to shake down his place and find nothing. I doubt I could get the judge to give me one just for that."

"Thanks, Anse."

Kilton went back to his office and Clay crossed the street to a restaurant and went in. He'd eat, sign the papers then ride back to the ranch. He'd miss the noon meal at the ranch and no point in making that ride empty.

He had just finished eating when a man raced into town and pulled his sweating horse up at the sheriff's office. Clay walked out on the porch and saw Kilton running for the horse he kept behind the jail. A couple of minutes later, the sheriff and the cowboy left town at a run. Clay rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

CLAY crossed the street to the saddle-shop and nodded to Brierly who was standing in the doorway, an awl and a leather lacing in his hand. "Who was the gent in a hurry?"

Brierly said. "A V Bar M man."

"Mitchel's ranch?" At Brierly's nod, a warning bell inside Clay, laid its tingle down his back. He half turned to face the Cattle King just as two men came out.

"A funny thing," Brierly said thoughtfully, "I saw that cowboy ride out awhile ago, him and another. They was drunk last night and I figured they stayed with their women last night. They sure as hell ain't had time to get to the ranch and back."

But Clay's attention was on those two men yonder. One was a small man with a mustache, quick moving and with a tied down gun. The second was a shambling man, likewise with a tied down gun, but he moved too easily to be as slow moving as he appeared to be. The small man moved out into the street, just off the board walk, the shambling man put a shoulder against the far corner of the saloon.

It was a pattern that Clay recognized instantly, and thought, so Mitchel is declaring war! There's Kilton's two men he's been looking for.

"Better get back inside, Brierly," Clay said.

Brierly said, in startled surprise, "Ackby and Cheston."

The town seemed instantly aware of the tableau and its significance. Men on the street faded quickly into doorways and stores, others were galvanized into action, running to move horses off the street and wagons and buggies. One man ran from a store, leaped into a wagon and lashed the horses, turning the wagon abruptly. The wheel screeched against the iron bed guard, lifted the bed in a heave that threw the standing driver headlong onto the ground. He was up instantly, bawling curses, slashing at the team. The horses lunged into the collars, straightened the wagon with a wheel sliding, scooping sand and then went down the street at a dead run, the man hanging to the lines, hitting the ground every ten feet, bawling, "Whoa!"

"Hey, Jarred!" the small man called in a powerful voice. "Jarred, you've been saying you were hunting me and Ackby. Here we are. Come and get us!"

The shambling man, then, was Ackby, the small one Cheston. Logan Mitchel had not lost any time, nor was he accepting things as they were. He was going whole hog. These were the men who had killed Gene and it was expected that Clay would come gunning for them. Who could say different?

A distance of fifty yards separated Clay and Cheston, and Clay at once stepped into the street and walked toward the gunman. There was no movement in the street now other than Clay but many eyes were watching. Clay walked slowly, steadily, his arms swinging gently.

When he was fifty feet away, Cheston called strongly, "That's far enough."

Clay stopped, the distance suitable, but still too far for a fanner. Both speed and aim counted now.

Cheston said, "You been wanting us for

your lousy kid brother, Jarred, well here we are. Make your talk!"

"You can cut the blabbermouth, Cheston," Clay said. "Turn loose your wolf."

"I'm ready, Jarred," Ackby suddenly shouted. "Draw!" He went for his gun and in the same movement threw himself behind the saloon's corner.

But Clay had not been sucked in by the same trick that had killed Gene. He had not even looked at Ackby. When Ackby shouted, Cheston had gone for his gun, and Clay stroked up his own pistol, felt Cheston's snap shot pass him as he aimed and shot Cheston through the chest. His second bullet threw Ackby's face full of splinters as that worthy shot his head from behind the saloon's corner.

Ackby bawled in surprise, then almost instantly, he was running down the side of the saloon, and Cheston lay flat on his back.

Clay ran too, into the weed-grown lot next the Cattle King on his side, and barely escaped the bullet Mitchel threw at him from the front doors. Instantly, Clay changed his plan to meet Ackby, knowing Mitchel would get another broad back shot before he could reach the rear of the saloon. Clay went another twenty feet at full speed then went flat in the weeds, turning enough to see Mitchel when the man came around the corner.

But Mitchel was more experienced than that, and instead, ran out into the street and wheeled to bring Clay into his sights along the side of the saloon. In another pair of seconds, Ackby would be in firing position at the rear corner and he'd be a caught fish between them.

Mitchel's gun was lifted for a chop shot, and momentarily he stared, wondering where Clay had gone. Then his eyes whipped to the weeds even as Clay came up and fired. Mitchel's gun blasted but he was already reeling from Clay's shot, and the bullet went wide, his next shot spurted dust as it went almost straight down.

Clay wheeled, going sideways and Ackby's bullet burned along his ribs, and Clay snapped a shot to spoil the man's next shot, thinking, I've one more shot.

His snap shot caused Ackby to flinch and his bullet threw dust on Clay, ripping into the weeds, and Clay lined his sights and fired. Instantly, he was punching the empties from his gun, but he saw at once that he would not need them with Ackby. The man was down.

Then Clay paused in his loading, staring, as Vannie came running, to fall beside Mitchel in the street, holding his head and screaming for help. Horses were pouring into the street now, and Sheriff Anse Kilton, with Sue and Buck Gage and two of Gage's cowboys, hauled up.

Kilton was bawling his rage, demanding to know what the hell was going on, threatening to take the hide and hair off somebody. When he saw Clay loading his pistol, he opened his mouth for a redfaced howl of rage, then saw Ackby. Slowly, Kilton closed his mouth, threw Clay a bitter scowl. "I hope you got a good story, Clay," he said thickly.

Sue Gage was coming headlong through the weeds to Clay. He caught her, holding her tight for a moment.

"How come Kilton's back?" he asked.

"Dad threatened to hit me over the head with a singletree when I told him what I'd done, showing you Vannie and Mitchel. He said they'd kill you sure if Mitchel was holding Ackby and Cheston under cover. We lit out and met Kilton on the way. He was the maddest sheriff you ever saw when Dad started to explain. The V Bar M cowboy started to light out and Kilton would have shot him if Dad hadn't knocked up his gun. We came on back on the run."

"Anse is going to be annoyed," Clay said. "But it was such a bald guntrap that if folks tell him so maybe he'll cool off."

"To heck with Anse Kilton," Sue said. "You come over to doc's and get that scorch you call it cleaned out. I want a healthy man to get married to!" Then she blushed scarlet as Clay grinned at her.

Clay grabbed her and kissed her. After a moment she struggled to free herself. "Clay, everybody's watching us."

"Let them," Clay said, and kissed her again.

THE GREATEST RIDE

A TRUE STORY

BY

LAURAN PAINE

HIS name was Francois Xavier Aubry. He stood a shade over five feet tall and weighed right at one hundred pounds. In the measure of the West he was a "shrimp" but in the measure the West used most often—guts—"Little Aubry" was quite a man. He was an indefagitable rider and a horse-killer par excellence. He was a braggart, a pint-sized brawler, and a little man with enough inner energy and compulsion to fill the frames of much larger men.

Born in 1824 of French-Canadian stock, Little Aubry was on the frontier at Independence, Missouri, in 1848. At that time it took a long month to make the saddleback trip from Independence to Santa Fe, which the United States were then wrenching away from Mexico in a bloody, pretty one-sided war.

Trade along the Sante Fe trail was brisk and profitable but the eight hundred miles that separated Independence from Santa Fe was a course of obstacles from start to finish. What the blistering summer sun didn't do, the murderously cold winters did, and what was left the Indians cleaned up. Altogether, the Santa Fe Trail was torture, but the trade-profits were high so men traveled southward loaded and returned, still walking beside ox teams, empty or partially filled with Mexican trade goods.

Still and all, though, the time involved in making the trip—often as long as three months—sobered the most eager traders. Naturally then Trail talk was of the distance and the danger. Even the Army's schedule for horseback travel the full distance was thirty days, and the Army had experimented quite a bit, having need to, for the Mexican War was on.

While teamsters were gathered around

campfires and soldiers congregated at bivouacs, Little Aubry caught them all unprepared when he blithely rode the entire eight hundred miles from Independence to Santa Fe in *fourteen days!*

He had started out with five companions. This was for protection, since brigands and Indians were rampant. The five companions dropped out one at a time until only Aubry galloped into the plaza at Santa Fe on the fourteenth day after he'd left Independence. Teamsters, soldiers, riders all along the frontier were incredulous. Many didn't believe Aubry had done it and refused to be convinced. Then, in 1850, with the Santa Fe trade at its zenith—the Mexican War was over and all taboos were removed from trading in the former Mexican colony —the man who could get to Santa Fe first made the largest profit.

Aubry had wagons and teamsters now, but they were traded-out and lying over in Santa Fe and the season was too well advanced for them to go back up to Independence, re-load, and return to Santa Fe before the Trail became a quagmire of mud and sleet winds. Aubry, undaunted, devised a way around this crippling obstacle. He would saddle up, ride back northeast, hire more wagons, teamsters and teams, and hurry them to Santa Fe before the rains came.

But Aubry, knowing that the frontier was full of doubters and by nature a shrewd man, publicly announced that he would make the trip back—*in eight days!*

Reaction was instantaneous and violent. Even those who believed he'd made the former ride in fourteen days were certain Aubry had over reached himself this time. Betting was rampant at both ends of the Trail. It couldn't be done. If the weather held, if the Indians didn't get him, if a horse or a relay of horses could stand up to it—it still couldn't be done. Aubrey bet on himself at great odds, few others dared to.

When he left Santa Fe six hard-bitten old hands accompanied him. Several left him at his first established relay where he changed horses without a word, sprang up and raced on. By the time he got to his next relay spot, he was riding alone. He continued to ride alone the rest of the way. He rode three horses to death and two mules. He was ambushed by Comanches who took his litle pouch of jerky and his mount. He walked, trotted and staggered forty miles after escaping from the Indians—to where his next relay station was. There, he got another horse and hurried on. For three days he didn't have a bite to eat and got down off his mounts only once, and that was when he relieved himself and slept with the reins in his hands for four hours.

It took him eight days and ten hours to get to Independence, but those who had bet against him agreed with the Army that he'd won his bet because his actual horseback time was seven days. The ten hours were forgotten in favor of his forty mile jog, his near-fatal brush with Comanches, and his terrible hardships. The Westerners liked a tough man even more than their cash. They conceded.

AFTER a long rest Aubry organized his wagon-train and went with it back to Santa Fe again and there, he told the West and the world: "I'll bet one thousand dollars I can make that ride in six days!"

Everyone, admiration aside, knew this was impossible. His bet was covered before the echo had died away. By now, however, there were a few canny betters whose belief in the little man's tough canniness was backed with gold. Wagers ran high. Meanwhile Aubry went back over his projected route with men and relay animals, establishing the places where he'd change mounts. There was one spot where he'd have to drive horses ahead of him because it was impractical to have remount stations. Then, the money down, the bets up, the relay stations established and waiting, Little Aubry was ready.

In the balmy pre-dawn of September 12, 1851, he swung out of Santa Fe on probably the most spectacular endurance ride ever made in the West—and one might add, the most needlessly cruel ride ever made.

He rode day and night in a slamming trot or an easy gallop but he never favored his horses. Sentimentalists say he could get more out of a horse than anyone else in the West at the time. That's pure bull for Little

Aubry killed a horse a day on that ride. Rode six horses to death under him.

But he suffered too. He changed mounts at Rio Gallinos, at San Miquel, at several impromptu stops when his horses sank under him and at Point of Rocks he found his remount station wiped out by Indians and rode the same animal, a mare named Dolly, two hundred miles in twenty-six hours. Beyond the Cimarron he left the quivering mare with a teamster he knew, got another beast and kept on going. He tied himself in the saddle and only ate when he could. Once, almost delirious from the punishment, he stopped and fell down beside his horse, sleeping for two hours. On the Arkansas he picked up a fresh horse and drove three more ahead of him. Santa Fe was four hundred miles behind him now: Independence was still a hell of a long way off. Under twenty miles he used up his fresh horse. The second one lasted less than ten miles and the hardest blow fell when the third animal proved defective and had to be given up under ten miles. Aubry was afoot. He turned the used up animals loose, hid his bridle, saddle and blanket, and went on afoot, trotting, weaving from side to side, bleary-eyed, dead on his feet. Twenty-four hours later he staggered into Fort Mann and fell asleep standing up while a horse was found, saddled, and brought to him.

Leaving Fort Mann he thundered past Coon Creek and later, past Pawnee Rock. At Council Grove he drank some coffee and had to tie himself in the saddle for the last one hundred and fifty miles of the trip, but he came within an ace of losing his bet when, at Big Springs, more dead than alive, he lay down while another horse was dug up for him, and a sympathetic barkeeper deliberately let him sleep six hours instead of the three hours he'd explicitly instructed the man not to exceed.

Angry but wonderfully refreshed, Aubry awoke six hours later and sprinted for a boat leaving the docks, destined for St. Louis. He made it and arrived at the end of his trip the next day. He had won not only his bet but notoriety as well. Aubry's name became a synonym for swiftness in the West. He was famous.

His own account of the ride stated: "Traveling time only counted, I made the trip in 4 days and twelve hours . . . . I made a portion of the trip at the rate of 250 miles to the 24 hours . . . . made 200 miles on my yellow mare in 26 hours."

WHAT, specifically, had Aubry proven? That an undersized litle runt could be the equal of larger men? I reckon, for there was no other reason to kill nearly a dozen good horses and mules by riding them to death; surely no other man would try to equal his record just to kill horses and prove it could be done, unless the Indians drove him to it. But, a lot of Westerners of Aubry's day lauded his feat, and when he left the Southwestern area of New Mexico for the golden legends of 1852 California, he took along ten wagons loaded with trade goods, over three thousand head of sheep and a large remuda of horses and mules.

He established no records for crossing the Plains and Sierras into California, it was too late for that, but he made a nice profit on his goods and went back to New Mexico, bought more sheep, horses and mules, and returned to the gold fields to trade in 1853. While the first crossing had been uneventful, the second wasn't to be so.

At a crossing of the Colorado River Aubry and companions were attacked by Digger Indians, the nondescript nomads of the Arizona-California desert country. Mockingly, Aubry's prower as a horse-killing speedster didn't help him here. He and his herders could have out-run the Indians easily, but not with several thousand short-legged sheep. They fought off the Indians for several days. Of this scrape Aubry recorded: "Indians shooting arrows around us all day wounded some of our mules and my famous mare Dolly, who has so often rescued me from danger by her speed and ca-capacity of endurance." Then, later in his diary he notes that there is "no suffering like the suffering from thirst."

When the full blast of early Autumn was on the desert, making it twist and wiggle with heatwaves, Aubry and his companions were reduced to eating their sheep and drink-

ing the blood. But the sheep played out, died from the heat, the constant driving, the Indian arrows, and in time the herders were down to existing off their played-out riding animals. Aubry, wounded a half dozen times superficially, recorded that: "I have the misfortune to know that the flesh we are eating is that of my inestimable mare Dolly . . . ." She had been critically wounded by Digger arrows; it was either eat her or leave her behind dead for the Diggers to eat. A chokingly bitter alternative that must have loomed large in the little man's mind even after they got to the civilized area on the desert's fringe, where the Diggers turned back to glean the habitual and disgusting nourishment they traditionally lived upon, the dead carcasses of Aubry's horses, mules and sheep.

But Aubry made no profit that trip, so, at twenty-nine, he sat out the winter in California and in the spring of 1854 returned for the last time to New Mexico with the intention of buying up more sheep, mules, other urgently needed commodities, and recoup his 1853 loss by taking another, safer route, back to the goldfields.

But this was never to be. At thirty years of age, Francois Xavier Aubry, five feet two, one hundred pounds, dark eyed, vital, egotistical, got into an argument with a drover down in Santa Fe. As early day Western arguments went it wasn't much of an affair, angry words, the flash of a heavy knife, a gout of blood and a dead man in the lemon-yellow sunlight, face down in the fly-infested dust of a crooked roadway. Little Aubry—his blood staining the same kind of adobe so many good horses had spurted their blood over, from bursting hearts and blood vessels—was dead.

Coming in the Next Issue—

Boothill Guns

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

Fight at Antelope Wells

An Exciting Novelet by PHILIP MORGAN

Plus

Wyatt Earp, Man of Iron

A Special Feature by LAURAN PAINE

The Drifter

By W. C. TUTTLE

OLD Baldy McGrew brought him to Canyon City, tied on a packsaddled mule, as inert a mass of living humanity as I have ever seen. Baldy said that apparently this feller was riding over the high-water trail, when some of it broke loose and dropped him and his horse down into the canyon where Baldy was working on his placer mine. The horse died immediately.

Doc Machin took over the case, if you could call it that. Some of us packed the man down to Doc's place. He wouldn't weigh over a hundred pounds, soaking wet and in the full bloom of health. Doc was what we called a professional half-breed—half M.D., half horse doctor.

A miner said, "Doc, he sure as hell don't look like much."

"He's a human being," Doc said, and went to work on the wreck of human flesh and bones.

Things are booming in Canyon City, and we went back to our work, letting Doc do his darndest. New mines were opening up most every day, and new people coming in all the time. We're so far away from civilization that we have to read a weekly paper from Gateway, sixty miles away, in order to occasionally remember that we're still part of the U.S.A.

My folks christened me Eustace Hollingsworth Smith, but everybody calls me Silent Smith. Well, I suppose it's for the

He was a crazy, little, busted-up sort of man, and he sure had us fooled

same reason that they call a tall man Shorty, or a fat man Skinny. I'm a barber in Canyon City.

Our town is kinda famous due to the fact that we have only one street, and you can't get lost. If you're in town, you're somewhere on Main street, or you're an expert mountain climber. For a tight little community of gun-packers, where the law is administered by a city marshal and a self-made magistrate, we don't have much blood-and-thunder to cope with. Part of the reason is because there's only one way out of town—the stage road to Gateway.

Our biggest headache was when the notorious Piegan Kid and his gang took over Canyon City. This Piegan Kid's past was papered with reward notices, and his four men were probably wanted everywhere, except in decent society. The Kid had always worked alone, but now he had a gang.

No one paid any attention to their arrival. They took over the Marshal's office, confiscated all his guns, and then proceeded to take guns away from everybody they met, until Canyon City was practically gunless. They cleand out the bank, the Alhambra Saloon and Gambling Palace, along with the stores and post office and some individuals. I locked the door of my shop, and made my exit through a smashed window. Before they got through, I don't believe there was a whole window on main street, and everybody was under cover.

This lasted for a half-day. Then a cowboy managed to pile onto a horse and head for Gateway. The Piegan Kid, realizing that the party was over, decided to pull out. He was the last to get mounted. The others, loaded with loot, were riding fast when somebody who still had a gun, took a last shot at the Kid as he whirled away from the Alhambra hitch-rack. He stung the Kid's horse, and the horse sun-fished into the hitch-rack dumping the Kid on his head.

So we tied him up tight, dumped him into the seat of a springwagon and took him to Gateway. The law and twelve honest men decided to hang him as soon as they could build a gallows. The Kid laughed at the law, even if he didn't have a visible chance to last a week.

But it seems that the Piegan Kid was sort of a masonry expert. With probably some outside assistance, he removed a few square-feet of that old brick jail wall, and faded out in the night. The real discouraging part of it was, as far as we were concerned, a note he left in the jail, which read:

Tell Canyon City I'll be back.

Our doughty marshal, Sam Hughes, said, "I wonder what he meant."

I say he's doughty because he doubts everything he hears. But he's always been a mighty man in times of peace. That Piegan Kid affair kind of made a lot of us doubt each other. Pop Lester, who runs the best cafe on the street, summed it up pretty good when he said:

"Let's face the truth for once. The Piegan Kid and his gang scared hell out of all of us."

And to cap that, our sky-pilot, Testament Thompson, made the shortest prayer of his life. All he said was, "Amen."

I DON'T know how he did it, but Doc Machin put that skinny specimen back on his feet. He didn't look like much, but he could walk on his hind-legs again. Doc brought him to me, and I cut off about a bale of hair and whiskers, which slimmed him down a lot. He was just a skinny-faced kid, about five feet, seven inches tall, with a pair of awful sad eyes. He didn't have any money and he didn't have a gun. He said he lost it when his horse fell into the canyon. His kind would look funny with a gun anyway.

Doc couldn't charge him for medical attention, and he's had to feed the little feller all this time. After a time he told Doc to call him Shorty. It was funny, but you couldn't dislike the little devil, and you couldn't like him either.

Slim Barry, boss of the Alhambra, looked Shorty over, trying to figure out if he'd be worth trying out as a swamper, but all he said was: "He's just like a cipher with the sum rubbed out."

But big-hearted old Pop Foster gave Shorty a job washing dishes in the cafe. The pay wasn't very big, but it gave Shorty a place to sleep and three meals a day. Shorty never complained. It took him quite a while to learn the job, but Pop was patient. Della Finley, the top waitress, thought Shorty was sweet. Maybe that wasn't the right word but it was the best thing anybody said about him.

Shorty still wasn't entirely cured. He had a limp in his left leg, his right arm troubled him and he said he still had headaches. Someone remarked that when Doc sewed up the twenty-seven stitches in Shorty's scalp, he went too deep with some of 'em.

I gave Shorty a free shave every couple days, and once I asked him if he aimed to stay in Canyon City.

"Maybe," he answered.

"Just waiting to get well, huh?" I said.

"Just waiting," he said.

A couple times a month a bunch of us old timers meet in a back room of the Alhambra and kind of map out things for the good of the community. One time Shorty's name was mentioned, and someone said he was getting along pretty good now. Nobody complained about him, we just talked.

Shorty wasn't very old, and it was sort of a shame for him to keep on washing dishes and all that. We thought he had no ambition at all. Pop said that Shorty would make a real good dishwasher, if he'd learn how to do things and keep his mind on the job.

"I've seen him stand there, a dirty plate in one hand and a rag in the other, and just stare at the wall for five minutes while everybody is yelling for plates. I dunno, maybe that fall kinked him up pretty bad. What do you think, Doc?" said Pop.

Doc Machin took his time answering, as he always did.

"I don't rightly know," confessed Doc. "He's a queer, quiet, little washed-out devil. You know, one day he said to me, 'Doc, what's a man's name worth?' Just like that. He had me stumped and all I could say was, 'Shorty, in this country a name don't mean a thing—they're so easy to alter.' He seemed to know what I meant. So then I said, 'It ain't so much the name as what you do with it.' "

"Well," said Pop, "there's one thing sure —Shorty won't ever hurt anybody. If he knows more than six words, I've never heard 'em. The only thing is, I can't afford to pay him much; not enough for him to ever get stage-fare to Gateway, even if he wanted to get out."

Well, the upshot of the meeting was that eleven of us agreed to pay Pop a dollar apiece a week, so he could pay it to Shorty. Pop said it would have to be that way, 'cause Shorty wouldn't take charity. I thought of all those shaves and Doc Machin thought of what he had done free—but we dug up the money.

I asked Pop the next day if he gave Shorty his raise, and Pop wasn't too happy. I asked Pop what Shorty said.

"I asked him if he didn't think he'd soon have enough money to move to a better place, and he said, 'It's nice here. Maybe I can save enough money to buy a horse,' " Pop answered.

I asked Pop if he knew why Shorty ever came to Canyon City, and he said he asked Shorty that same question.

"Well?" I asked.

"He just stared at the wall—a plate in one hand and a dishrag in the other," said Pop. "Maybe he don't remember."

THE next day, along about noon, I was in Pop's place eating at the counter. Pop was there, leaning against the counter talking with me. I could look through a service window and see Shorty back there, washing dishes. Sam Hughes, the marshal, was over at a table, talking with Henry Justine, the banker. Several other folks were in there, eating and talking.

Then it sounded like a handful of firecrackers were going off down the Street, and it was still two months short of Fourth of July. A couple more went off, closer this time, and a window of the cafe went out in a shower of busted glass. The door was flung open, and a man sprawled across the floor.

"The Piegan Kid and his gang!" he yelled and started crawling into the kitchen on his hands and knees.

The scene in there changed awful fast. Sam Hughes and Henry Justin went to the floor, and it looked as though both of them were trying to get behind the same chair-leg. Another bullet came through the broken window and smashed the glass on a framed picture behind the counter.

I don't want anybody to think that I'm so brave I could sit there and tell what happened. The fact is, I was paralyzed from the knees down. Loose horses were running around the street, a runaway wagon team took the porch-posts from under the porch at the Alhambra, and the air was full of dust. I remember looking back through the service window, and I saw Shorty wiping his hands on his dirty-white apron. It just struck me that he wanted to go out clean.

Somebody yelled that a fire was starting at the south end of the street, but nobody made a move to try and put it out. Then Shorty came from the kitchen, still wearing his old apron, sleeves rolled up. As he started for the door, I wanted to yell to him to get down, but my voice sounded like a little whistle. Then he opened the door and walked out.

The Piegan Kid gang was out in the middle of the street, shooting the windows out of the two-story hotel, when Shorty came out, and turned to the left. I managed to get to the busted window on my hands and knees, and I peered out. I couldn't see Shorty, but I could see them five outlaws, smoking guns in their hands, their eyes following Shorty, as he went up the sidewalk.

It seemed as though every sound died out suddenly. Them five men just stood there, paying no attention to anything else.

I figured that Shorty had gone into the marshal's office, from the way the five outlaws acted.

Maybe I'm just a nosey old devil or maybe I forgot to be careful—but I *had* to see what was going on out there. I stuck my head and shoulders through the smashed window, where I could look straight up the street. Just then Shorty stepped out of the marshal's office, with a .30-.30 Winchester carbine in his hands. He stopped short, feet braced, with the butt of the gun against his right thigh.

If any man ever contemplated suicide it was Shorty. All five outlaws were looking at him, probably too amazed to shoot him. Then the Piegan Kid came to life and swung up his gun. It seemed as though all the windows of the marshal's office faded out in a blast of gunfire, but the Piegan Kid was spinning on one high-heel, his gun flying over his head.

One man began turning around like a tired pup, and ran into another one who was doing a soft-shoe dance, looking down at his own feet, arms outspread. Another one tossed his gun aside, backed up, hit the calves of his legs against the sidewalk and fell flat on his back. I dunno what happened to the fifth one. When I saw him, his nose was in the dirt.

It was all over in split-seconds. Shorty, during all that fusillade, never even moved his braced feet. He levered out the last empty shell, turned back into the office.

We all suddenly got real brave, and went out there. Not one of the five was worth Doc's attention.

A short time later Shorty went back to the cafe to his job.

I don't believe Shorty wanted to leave Canyon City, but the bank bought him a horse and the rest of us bought him a saddle. Sam Hughes gave him a belt and a Colt .45.

Somebody had to notify the sheriff and the coroner at Gateway, so I took the job. Shorty said good-bye, and we pulled out.

While the sheriff and the coroner were getting ready for the trip to Canyon City, the sheriff talked to Shorty.

"So you got the notorious Piegan Kid," he said. "You're a mighty big, little feller. Dozens of rewards, big money rewards. I'll see that you get the money."

"Don't bother, Mister," said Shorty quietly. "You'll find out he wasn't the Piegan Kid—just a name-rustler."

Shorty rode away then in the dark. Don't ask me what he meant.

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CAVALRY

Apache fighting laid bare all the loves and hates of a man

BY THE time First Lieutenant Jim Meredith came out of his small bachelor's quarters into the bright sunlight of this Arizona day, the Troop was already forming under the hard voice of First Sergeant Clarence Muldoon. Jim had spent the past two hours checking horses and equipment, leaving him little time to get his gear ready. There had been no time for him to say goodby to Janet Blake, which was exactly what Captain Sydney Blake, her uncle, had planned.

As Jim walked quickly toward the Troop, Janet came out of the Captain's house and waited for him. Jim saw Captain Blake come from Headquarters and move toward his horse just as he reached the girl. Knowing Blake would ride him for being late, he nevertheless held up. Taking off his hat, he smiled at this fair-haired, pretty girl, who had come to mean so much to him in the past few months. She touched his arm with gentle fingers and her voice was warm for him.

"Hurry back, darling. I'll be waiting."

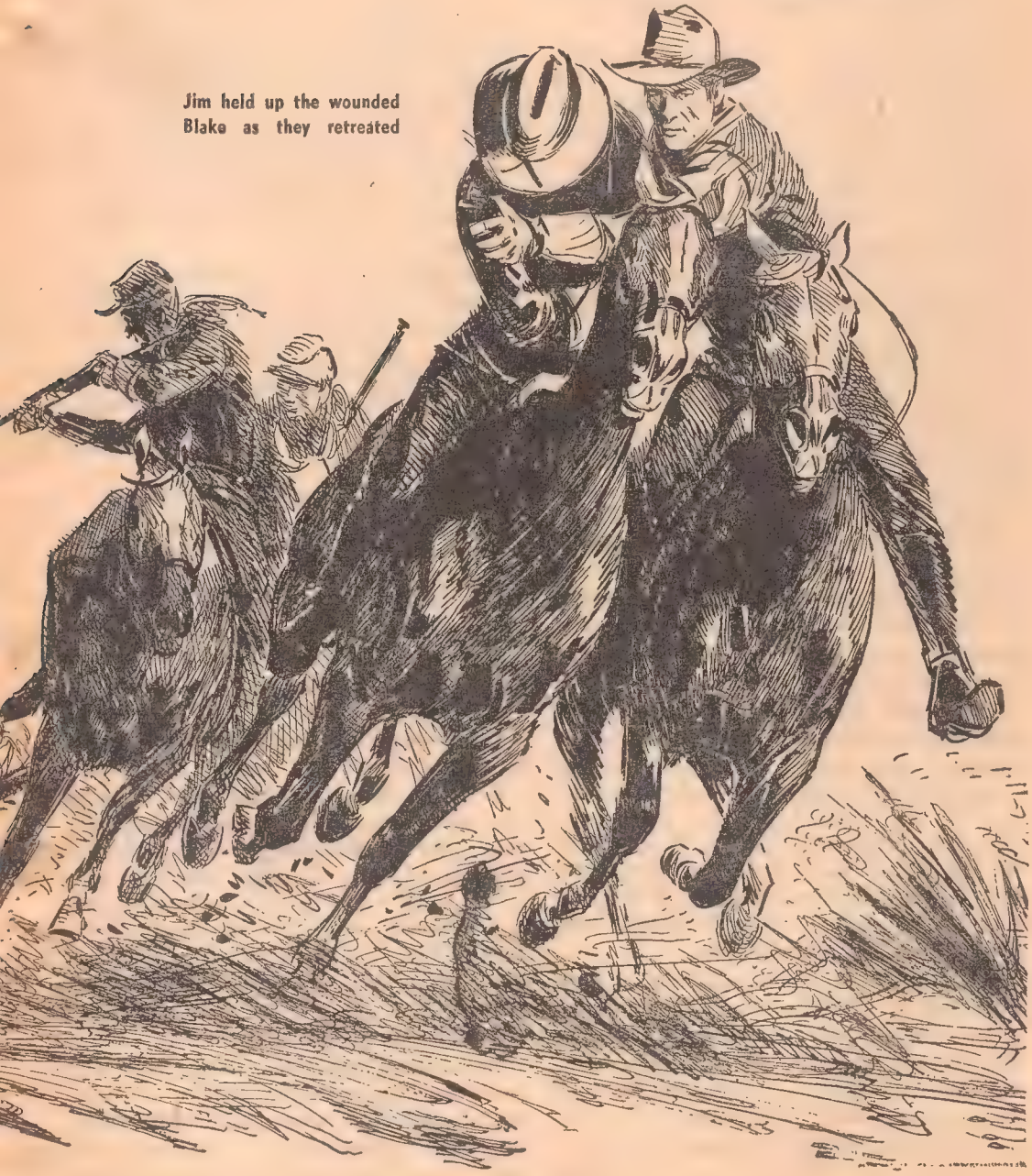
"I'm not supposed to see you, remember?" he asked and smiled wryly. "My immediate superior has specifically informed me that you aren't for any frontier lieutenant with no chance of promotion."

"He doesn't own me," the girl said sharply. "He's trying to use me in his schemes to get ahead. I won't let him. You take care of yourself and come back to me, hear?"

On impulse then, and knowing that not only Captain Blake but the entire Troop was watching, he stepped forward and kissed her full on the lips. She returned the kiss until Sydney Blake's sardonic

ACTION

By PHILIP MORGAN



Jim held up the wounded Blake as they retreated

voice struck across the parade at them.

"If it isn't too much trouble, Mister Meredith, we have a scout to make."

There was a concerted snicker from the men which Sergeant Muldoon quieted with one lethal glance over his shoulder. Jim walked quickly to his horse, accepted the reins from Private Landers, and rose to the leather.

"Sorry I kept you waiting, sir," he said, but he was smiling.

Blake knew Jim was pleased and lashed at him with his angry gaze. Captain Blake was a hard man and he expected obedience from those under his command. He was a driving, intolerant man whom the enlisted men feared and respected, but did not like. Nor was the captain a mixer with those of equal rank. His overpowering, never forgotten ambition made others uncomfortable in his presence. He ran his Troop with hard discipline and he ran himself by the same harsh code. It was impossible for him to understand his junior officer's easy-going ways and he interpreted them as weakness.

Now, as he shouted his commands in clipped tones, the men stiffened to attention and stayed that way as they rode from the fort and dropped down the small slope to the desert beyond. There were forty troopers, two officers and Charley Owens, the civilian scout.

Once well clear of the fort, Captain Blake spoke to Jim and Charley Owens, letting them in on his plans with evident reluctance. "You've both heard why we're out. Diablo left the reservation three days ago with forty young bucks. They killed the agent and yesterday they massacred the Appleton family on Church Creek and looted their store. We are to pursue and bring them in or destroy them."

Charley Owens, who was old at this game, spoke reflectively now. "It might be a question of who destroys who, Cap'n. That Diablo is a mean one and he's smart. Jim and me was in on the fight the last time he went out. It was tough."

"I think he's heading for Mexico," Captain Blake said. "Therefore, we will make quick time to cut him off before he gets into the Cholla Hills. Once in there, he's lost to us. It means that we will have to drive the men and horses. Mister Meredith, you will see to it that the command stays closed up and in good marching order. Can you handle it?"

Jim silently cursed him for that. He had been soldiering on the frontier for five years and Blake was treating him like a raw lieutenant fresh out of the Point. He started a sharp retort, but cut it off, remembering that Blake wanted him to lay himself open to a charge of insubordination. He said, "I think I can handle it, sir," with just enough irony for the captain to understand and not enough to be insubordinate.

"I'm glad to hear it," Blake said sardonically. "From observing you at the fort, I was afraid that you might be getting soft. You're too easy on the men, lieutenant." Captain Blake resumed his incessant searching of the land and Charley Owens winked at Jim.

AFTER that it was a silent march, a test of endurance for men and animals. They were heading southwest across the open desert, with the shape of the Cholla Hills grimly leading them on. The heat radiated up from the earth with the intensity of the open door of a blast furnace. It was bearable only when a mind was completely blank. A man let his senses become dulled deliberately. He became as stolid as any Apache.

Dust rose head high and hung there in the still air. Some of the men pulled their neck pieces over their noses and mouths and Captain Blake's voice lashed at them at once. It was a parade ground march and the men cursed the Captain to themselves. But they went down the miles of the Cholla Hills changed from a vague outline to a sharp picture of upheaved rock and sheltering timber.

The captain kept Jim moving back and forth the length of the column, checking on the march. It was an unneeded hardship that did not escape the notice of the men. They liked Jim and some of them felt sorry for him. But they disliked all

officers as a group and it was interesting for them to see one getting the kind of treatment usually reserved for enlisted men. They silently considered the cause of the breach between the two officers and some of them came pretty close to the real reason.

Captain Blake halted them at noon and the men sprawled in the scant shade of the saguaro cactus, dead beat. At one o'clock Blake's cold voice drove them to their feet and they went on, heading always for the Cholla Hills, the ancestral home of Diablo. They were approaching the broken country that was the fringe of the desert.

Jim could not keep his thoughts on the Apaches. This petty hazing the captain was handing him did not make sense. That started him thinking and he could not stop. Giving in, he searched for the answer to the trouble between Blake and himself.

It had culminated last night, but it had started, he saw now, almost from the first time he had seen Janet Blake. The girl had liked him and shown it. He had been with her every spare moment and their liking had gradually changed to love. As he came to see her more often, Captain Blake's attitude changed from mere tolerance to plain displeasure. It began to affect their relationship on duty as well as off. Jim knew that something was wrong, but he was too interested in Janet to spend time worrying about it. It hadn't worried him. Not until last night.

Last night he had proposed to Janet and she had accepted. They had gone back to the captain's house at once to tell him the news. As he listened, Blake's face colored and he did not congratulate Jim. Instead, he had asked Janet to leave the room. She was puzzled, but in her new-found happiness, she didn't worry. Jim had not liked the captain's tone and as he waited for him to speak his muscles were tense. Captain Blake paced the room stiffly, his hands behind his back. Finally, he pulled up and poured his bitter words on Jim, in the same tone he would have used on a recalcitrant private.

"Mister Meredith, I've been afraid something like this was coming. That's the danger with bringing a young girl into this God-forsaken land. There are no eligible young men and she thinks she's falling in love with the only one available. Well, you might as well understand right now that I won't permit my neice to marry you."

Jim felt the anger rise in his breast and he had to clench his hands at his sides to keep from striking out at Blake's smug face. He waited until he had his voice under control before he answered. "I resent that, sir. I think she has had ample opportunity to choose."

"I don't," Blake said bluntly. "I ask for your word that you will not see her again."

"I refuse to give it," Jim said flatly. "You have no right to ask me to give it."

"I have every right," Blake replied icily. "When we were stationed in Washington, Janet was seeing a lot of Major Henry Bridger. He is a man who is going places in the army. He was a wonderful future and he wants to marry Janet. I won't let her throw herself away on a dirt-poor lieutenant who will never rise above the rank of captain. This is nothing more than an infatuation. I forbid you to see her."

"You can't do that and you know it," Jim said, some of his anger spilling out in his raised voice. "Janet's told me about Major Bridger. His father is General Bridger, who can help anyone advance in the army. But she doesn't love the Major and won't marry him. She intends to marry me and there isn't a thing you can do to stop her."

Blake's service pistol and saber were lying on a small table beside him and for a second Jim thought Blake would draw the pistol and shoot him. Pure murder shone in the captain's pale eyes for that second. But then a slight shudder passed through his stocky frame and he had control of himself.

"All right, Mister Meredith," he said harshly, "if that's how it is, I'll have to arrange it so you can't see her. When we return from tomorrow's scout, I am sending Janet back to New York."

"She won't go."

"She has no choice. I am her legal guardian and she won't be twenty-one for six months. Good evening, Mister Meredith."

JIM had gone, before he smashed in Blake's face and ruined their chances completely. He was sick at the thought of losing Janet and he went back to his quarters and lay wide awake and fully dressed, searching for some escape from Blake's cold logic. He found none and gradually, in the cold hours of early morning, hatred grew in him like an ugly cancer. Now, riding beside Blake, he considered all this and a monstrous thought occurred to him for the first time. Blake was deliberately sacrificing Janet's happiness on his altar of success. That was what Janet had meant when she said she would not be used in Blake's schemes. It was an unclean thought, yet it seemed to be the only answer.

At five o'clock they raised the dust of a good-sized band of horses some five miles ahead. The band was near the base of the Cholla Hills and Blake uttered a curse as he spotted it. He dismounted the Troop and called Jim and Charley Owens to him. He stood very straight, looking at that dust cloud.

"What do you make of it, Owens?" Blake asked.

"I don't know, Cap'n," Charley answered laconically. "There's dust there, that's all. Horses for sure, but hard to say whether it's all of Diablo's bunch."

"They are almost into the Hills," Blake said meditatively. "The only way we can get to them before they make it is straight at them and fast. Dangerous work."

"It could be a trap," Jim cautioned.

"I know that it could be a trap, Mister Meredith. But our orders are to get Diablo and if he gets into the Hills' he's gone. We have no choice but to try and run him down. It is a considered risk."

Blake talked to Jim as if he were giving a lecture and Jim had to clench his jaws together to stifle his anger. Blake strode to his horse and mounted and as soon as the command was in the saddle, he put them forward at a trot. The land here was broken into a series of gulches and dry washes and not far ahead of the Apaches., the Cholla Hills rose sharply, covered with stunted timber.

They went on at a trot, closing the distance, the ground gradually rising under them. The dust cloud was a large one, large enough to cover Diablo's entire band, but it might be a fake.

Blake kept hipping around in the saddle, shouting, "Close up, close up," and then would swing forward again. His face was taut with excitement and Jim knew the captain was already writing his report.

Blake had asked for frontier duty, because he didn't have enough combat time on his record. In his incessant drive for promotion, he saw that he was being passed over in favor of men with less administrative ability, but more time in action. He wanted, above all else, to make good in this assignment, to have his name favorably mentioned in the despatches as a capable field officer.

That terrible ambition was the hole in his armor. He was a cold-blooded purposeful man who never did anything on impulse. But now, seeing his chance for glory so close ahead, he forgot caution. He raised his command to a lope, which was too fast to be traveling over unknown, broken country. Jim felt a quick stab of apprehension. He remembered Diablo and the wily fox would not be caught so easily. This was probably a trap, but as Blake had said, there was no other way. It was either quit the chase and let Diablo escape, or plunge ahead. So they went, making good time on the level stretches, sliding into small dry washes and laboring up the far side. The Troop began to string out and Jim dropped back and told them to close up.

They had the Apache band right in front of them and a mile distant now. Still it was impossible to see through that dust pall. Jim rode in the lead beside Captain Blake, seeing the man's flushed, triumphant face.

Suddenly Charlie Owens pulled along-

side and shouted a warning. "They ain't there, Cap'n. That's just four or five draggin' blankets and stirrin' up the dust."

It was too late by a couple of minutes. They were on the lip of a dry wash and there was no stopping with the pressure of the Troop at their backs. They went into the wash—a wide, sandy cut in the earth with sides steeper than most. And it was here that Diablo had laid his ambush. The Troop hit the wash bunched up and the fire of the waiting Apaches smashed into them and set them milling and there was no chance to get out the far side. The other bank was too steep for any but running horses. The first Apache volley hit them solidly. Trooper Larken screamed in terror and pain as a slug tore through his chest. Landers, beside Larken, fell silently and loosely.

AFTER that, it was a bitter, deadly fight. The Apaches rushed in through the rising dust. The screams of the horses transcended all other sounds. Jim pulled his revolver and targetted those weaving, vaporous shapes and fired steadily. Beside him, Charley Owens worked the lever of his Winchester, calmly and deliberately getting a man with each shot.

Muldoon's huge voice kept them together and gave them confidence. "Stay together. Don't let the heathen sons cut you off." Troopers went down and Apaches went down in a screaming hell of noise and heat and death. The Troop was jammed up, its mobility completely destroyed and the Apaches were systematically cutting them to pieces. Looking quickly around for Blake, Jim was in time to see the captain shove his horse close.

"We've got to get out of here. We'll take them down the wash." Jim nodded his understanding. Blake shouted his commands. "Down the wash at the gallop. Follow me." Muldoon heard and picked it up and they got the Troop started. Jim had Charley Owens on one side and Captain Blake on the others and they spurred head-on at a line of Apaches blocking the wash.

The three of them hit that line of Apaches, shooting and clubbing, and they broke the line and left it to reel down the length of the charging, battered column. Jim fired until the hammer came down on a spent cartridge and then he clubbed down an Apache who sprang to pull him off the horse. Everything was confused, yet now it was an organized confusion. The troopers were turned in their saddles, shooting back at the Apaches, and the Indians fire was falling off. They were in the clear finally when it had looked as if they would all die back there. Captain Blake swung wide and held up to take a count of the men and Jim pulled out to join him.

"Go back, Mister Meredith, and lead to that hill over west," Blake said. As Jim reined away, he heard the soft, sickening sound of a bullet striking flesh. He jerked his head around in time to see Captain Blake fall forward on the neck of his mount. He reined around and brought his horse alongside Blake and supported him with an arm around his shoulders. Blake had a hand over the wound in his side and the blood ran down between his fingers.

"Can you ride, if I hold you in the saddle?" Jim asked quickly. The tail of the column was passing and they couldn't wait longer. The Apaches would be close behind.

"I'll have to," Blake said grimly. "Get us out of here."

Jim held him and got the two horses moving. They rocked forward, with Blake reeling in the saddle. The jolting of the horse must have been agony, but Blake did not complain and Jim gave him grudging admiration for that.

Charley Owens led them to the crest of the hill that rose close beside the wash. Muldoon immediately put the surviving thirty troopers digging rifle pits. Charley helped Jim lower Captain Blake from his horse. The Captain was white faced, but he still made no sound. Jim tore open the Captain's tunic and examined the wound. He bandaged it tightly and sat back on his heels, his face impassive.

"Well?" Blake asked sharply.

"I don't know, sir. It's a clean wound, but it's bleeding badly. You'll have to take it easy."

Blake's face was gray, but he managed a grim smile. "If I checked out, you'd feel terrible, lieutenant. Therefore, I intend to stay alive. Don't just sit there. Check our position and bring me a report on the casualties and the ammunition."

Charley Owens was squatting with them and his tough face showed an instant resentment. But Jim rose and left the Captain without answering. He made the rounds of the rifle pits with Sergeant Muldoon. The men's faces were just beginning to lose the fixed look that action always brought. It was comprised of fear and hatred and savage determination to survive. Death had ridden that wash with them and was just now leaving their sides.

Muldoon waited until Jim had made his check and then said, "They gave us a whipping, sir. I hate to go home with our tails between our legs." Jim had been thinking the same thing and he eyed the sergeant thoughtfully. But he shook his head.

"There's nothing we can do, Muldoon. The Captain is bleeding pretty badly. He'll die if he doesn't get aid."

"Diablo will have big medicine now. He'll lure a hundred more bucks off the reservation. They could terrorize the whole Territory."

"It's a tough break," Jim said. Jim reported to Captain Blake. Blake was resting with closed eyes and his breathing was too shallow and too labored. Jim didn't like it. Blake opened his eyes after a minute, but he seemed to be trying to remember where he was. Then he smiled slightly.

"I was home in Vermont just then. Have you ever been in Vermont, Mister Meredith?"

"No, sir, but I hear that it is beautiful."

"It is all of that," Blake said. Then his voice sharpened. "Well, how do we stand?"

"It wasn't as bad as it could have been, sir. We lost ten men. The rest have twenty-five rounds for carbine and ten for pistols. You did a good job getting us out, sir." He did not like Blake, but the hatred was less now. He felt sorry for the man. Also, he respected him; for the stoicism with which he bore the wound.

"Thank you, but you don't need to sugarcoat it. I led them into a trap. I was too eager and it cost me a fourth of my command. I have nothing to be proud of."

Charley Owens had come up in time to hear the last of this. He said, "Cap'n it was a natural mistake. I should've headed you off sooner."

"How are we fixed, Owens? Where are the Apaches and what are they doing?"

"I seen a little dust comin' from the wash," Charley said, "but I ain't seen an Indian. They're down there, waitin' to see what we're gonna do. Diablo has his victory and I don't think they'll bother us again. We can ride out east as soon as it gets good and dark."

"In that case, gentlemen," Blake said formally, "I believe I'll rest for awhile. Call me immediately if anything happens." He closed his eyes and was immediately asleep.

JIM rose and signalled Charley to follow. The scout came after him and they walked to the crest of the hill and looked down at the wash some four hundred yards below and west of them. Nothing stirred. The sun was a brass ball hanging on the rim of the world one moment and gone the next. The desert's sudden darkness fell. The stillness was broken only by the sounds of the men as they ate a cold meal and took a carefully rationed drink.

"You really think they'll leave us alone?" Jim asked.

"I think so. They don't like rushing a fixed position. See," he pointed and Jim saw the reflected light of several small campfires that burned in the wash. "Just like I figured," Charley said. "They got hold of Appleton's whisky stores and they're gettin' ready to celebrate."

Jim crouched and stared reflectively at the fires. He was thinking of what Muldoon had said. Here was a chance. Their

mission had been to wipe out Diablo and his men. The mission was not accomplished, but the opportunity was still there. Finally, though, he shook his head and stood up. They couldn't chance it, not with the Captain so badly wounded.

"Come on, we better get ready to pull out. I wish he wasn't shot up. I see a chance to even things up." They were closer to Blake than he had realized and the Captain's bloodless voice hit out at him.

"What's that, Mister Meredith? You have a plan to strike back at Diablo?"

Jim said, "Just a thought, sir. We better be getting back to the fort."

"I want to hear your plan," Blake said. "That's an order."

"Well," Jim said reluctantly, "they're in the dry wash, sir. They have fires burning and Charley thinks they're drinking. That's the one time they get careless. It might be possible to slip into the wash and charge down it, coming out where we went in this afternoon. We might catch them by surprise and cut them up. They wouldn't expect us at night and they don't like to fight at night. But you aren't fit to ride."

"Charley," Blake asked, "is the plan feasible?" There was a thin note of excitement in Blake's voice.

The scout thought about it for awhile and finally answered acidly, "It might work, seems crazy enough to work. As long as you didn't get stopped once you started, you might do it."

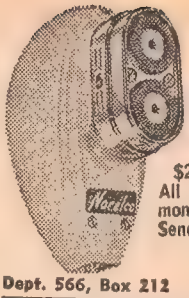
"All right," Blake said, "you'll try it."

"But you can't ride, sir," Jim said.

"I'm staying here," Blake said flatly. "I'm wounded, but I still command this Troop. Get the non-coms here and outline the plan to them. And Mister Meredith, you better do it right, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Jim said. Even now, Blake couldn't resist a chance to ride him. But the captain was showing courage in staying here. He knew what would happen to him if Diablo's men found him. Jim called the non-coms and gave out the orders. A fierce satisfaction possessed him as he

[Turn page]



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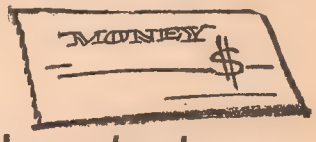

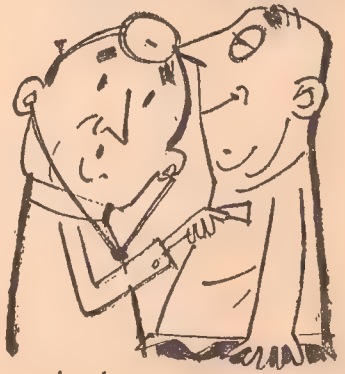

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thought of taking revenge. But he was sobered by the knowledge that the Troop was his now. These were men he knew well and had soldiered with for years. He felt the responsibility of their safety very strongly.

Jim told them the plan and then gave them their orders. "Get rid of everything that rattles. Saddle up and leave everything but weapons and canteens. We'll ride through the wash and pull out where we went in this afternoon. It could be tough, or it could be a turkey shoot, but we're going to show Diablo that two can play his game. Good luck to all of you."

There were murmurs after he stopped talking, but he couldn't tell whether they approved the plan. When the command was formed, he and Charley reported to Captain Blake.

"Any orders, sir?" Jim asked.

"Just this, lieutenant. If you can get back here safely, come for me. But you will not risk the command coming back." He added very quietly. "Maybe you better not come back. I haven't changed my mind about you and my niece."

Jim wheeled away, so mad he couldn't see. He walked blindly to his horse and climbed into his saddle. For awhile, he almost liked Blake. But then the man deliberately angered him. Blake was inhuman. He led the Troop down the hill, half hoping that they would not be able to get back. He shook his head and put from him all thoughts but those connected with the attack. The Apaches were singing, the weird sound filling the night around them and masking the noise of their descent.

THEY made it to the rim of the wash without being detected. The Apaches were around a bend to the north some two hundred yards. Jim entered the wash and turned along it. When the men were all safely down, he called, "Forward at the gallop," and drew his revolver. He said, "Ho," and put the spurs to his horse. The big black jumped forward and stretched out into a hard run. The beat of hooves was muffled by the sandy floor of the ravine. As they came up on the bend in the wash, a lone Apache scout stood silhouetted against the sky. He screamed a belated warning. Jim whipped up his revolver and killed the man with one shot.

They charged around the bend to find the Apaches directly before them. They bore down on the fires, and the squat figures crouched around them, like avenging angels. The Apaches had been drinking heavily and they were slow to rise, a confused mass caught in the open. Jim heard their wild screams of rage and surprise and then he was on them. His horse ran down one buck, rolling him under its feet. Jim fired and sought another target and fired again, feeling no elation. It was a dirty job, better done. The Apaches were frantically trying to get out of the wash, but they were drunk and they were stopped for a time by the high sides of the wash, and they died there, sliding back to lie face down in the sand.

It was a slaughter in the narrow wash, lit by the flickering light of the fires. Every trooper had a reason for revenge and they exacted it with lead. The Apaches were caught completely off guard and they did not fight back. Jim was charging down on the last fire when he saw the heavy shape of a lone Apache break for the wall of the wash. It was Diablo, sitting alone at his fire, a man apart, as always. Jim shot and missed him and dropped his hammer on an empty chamber.

He rode for Diablo, seeing the Apache whirl and make a stand, knife uplifted. The Apache's eyes glittered with hatred and with a blood-lust that was as much a part of him as the marrow of his bones. Jim whirled his mount at the last instant and slashed down at Diablo's knife arm with his gun barrel. He heard the pop of a breaking bone and Diablo dropped his knife and fell to his knees to retrieve it. Jim came off the horse in a long jump and as Diablo raised the knife in his left hand, Jim swung his revolver in a long arc and smashed in the Apache's skull. Diablo slid forward on his face and Jim swung back to the saddle and followed the run-

ning Troop down the wash.

They left the wash and rode a half mile out into the desert. A brief count showed Jim that he had not lost a man and relief welled up in him. He shook hands ceremoniously with Charley Owens and he received congratulations from a smiling Muldoon. After that, they set out for the hill. When Jim crested the hill, he saw Captain Blake, raised on an elbow, his service revolver cocked in his hand. When Blake saw them, he sank back on the blankets, letting the pistol fall.

Jim reported to him. "It went well, sir. We killed most of them and dispersed the rest. Diablo is dead and we didn't lose a man."

"Good," Blake said. "It will look better in the despatches. Now, we better be moving out."

Jim turned to Muldoon. "Have Peterson ride to the fort and have Doctor Evans and an ambulance meet us at Sandy Ford. Fix a travois for the Captain. We're leaving as soon as it's ready."

They pulled out an hour later. A travois had been made by lashing two poles together with the strips of a cut-up blanket, making a crude, but effective meshing between the poles. One end of the travois was lashed to the back of the Captain's horse, while the other dragged the ground. It made for rough riding, but it was the best they could do.

Jim rode at the head of the column with Charley Owens, but he dropped back often to see how Blake was doing. The captain's wound started to bleed again and he sank into a semi-coma. He was delirious and rambled on about his home in Vermont. His fever was too high and Jim thought he was going to die. But the hours dragged on and Blake's voice kept up its incessant mumbling. They covered the long miles to Sandy Ford, through the chill desert night, and there awaited the ambulance.

IT CAME an hour after dawn with an escort of twenty troopers. Doctor Evans was along and Janet Blake rode the seat of the ambulance with him. She

[*Turn page*]

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jumped down as soon as the ambulance stopped and dropped beside the travois, silently crying.

Doctor Evans came right over and pulled her gently to her feet. "Let me get him into the ambulance, Janet. This sun isn't doing him any good. I want to get a look at that wound."

He signaled four troopers and they lifted Blake carefully and placed him in the ambulance. Doctor Evans climbed in and Janet looked around for Jim. He came to her.

"He'll be all right, Janet," he said.

"He's so pale," she said. "I'm frightened, Jim."

"He's tough as a boot. He'll pull through."

"Did he say anything about us? Has he changed his mind?"

"He told me nothing had changed," he told her regretfully.

They waited in silence, standing close together. A quiet hung over the area as every man waited for the Doctor's verdict. The men were suddenly remembering all the good things Blake had done for them and forgetting how they had always disliked him. They were all pulling for him, probably because they had ridden down that wash together. Jim noticed and was not surprised. His hatred of Blake was gone. He could never hate any man who had made that ride with him out of Diablo's trap.

It was an hour before Doctor Evans came out. He was smiling and they knew it was going to be all right. He went directly to Jim and Janet.

"He'd like to speak to both of you, but don't stay long. He's lost a lot of blood and he's weak. He needs rest."

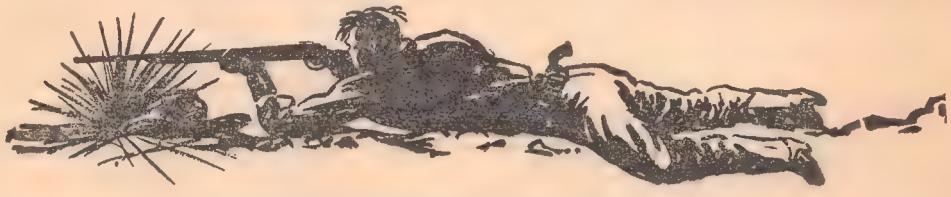
They climbed into the ambulance. Captain Blake had a heavy bandage around him, but the bandage was not stained, so the bleeding had stopped. The same gray color was on him, but he looked better and he was rational. Janet kissed him on the forehead and he smiled at her.

"I don't suppose I deserve that. I was pretty rough on you two. But lying alone on that hill last night, thinking I was dying, I saw things pretty clearly. I've been a fool. A lot of things that seemed important to me aren't any longer. I think I'll be easier to live with now. And you have my blessing. Janet, you are getting a good officer. I found out last night that you don't have to be a spit and polish soldier to know your business." He smiled again and Janet took his hand and pressed it to her cheek, her face radiant.

"Thank you, sir," Jim said. "We're both grateful."

"I hate to give her up. She's made life a whole lot easier. Now, get out of here and let me rest."

They left the ambulance, but before Jim dropped the curtain, he glanced back. Captain Blake, who had never believed in being too friendly with his junior officers, winked solemnly at him.



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GUNMAN'S LEGION

(Concluded from page 56)

more we can do now. I will bring men back in the morning to bury the dead. Will you ride back with me and be my guest? We will have a fiesta tonight. My brave *peones* deserve that."

"Ride ahead," said the Lone Wolf. "I see Joel Waggoner is all hitched up and ready to leave. I'll catch up with you in a few minutes."

He led Goldy to the river bank and stood there silently watching the water reflect the moon's borrowed light. A single star slid through a cloud, a faint spot of tired silver. Hatfield brought out the desertwillow blossom, crumpled and broken now, that Desiree Duveras had given him, and tossed it into the water.

He watched it until it was lost in the darkness. Then he mounted Goldy and rode to join the others.

HAUNTED DUST

(Concluded from page 64)

the tracks Lindsey never would have found him.

The tracks led around an immense boulder resting against a palisade of solid rock and disappeared into some brushy growths clinging to the face of the canyon wall and when Lindsey explored the growths he found the dead Apache in the passageway that led through the canyon to freedom.

That night the wind increased and blew with fury. It scourged the canyon walls and lashed the trees and grass. It heaped sand over a bow and arrows and a beaded belt and some scalps. It whipped spray off the waterfall. It found Ames where he had been laid and snatched the covering blanket from him. It swept sand away from beside him and not far down found a large, smooth rock, a rock that once had been a hearthstone.

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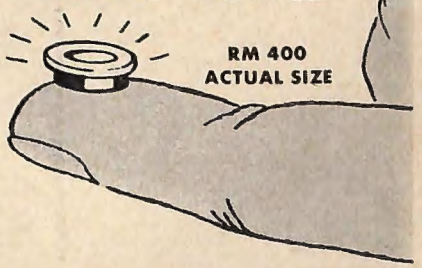

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